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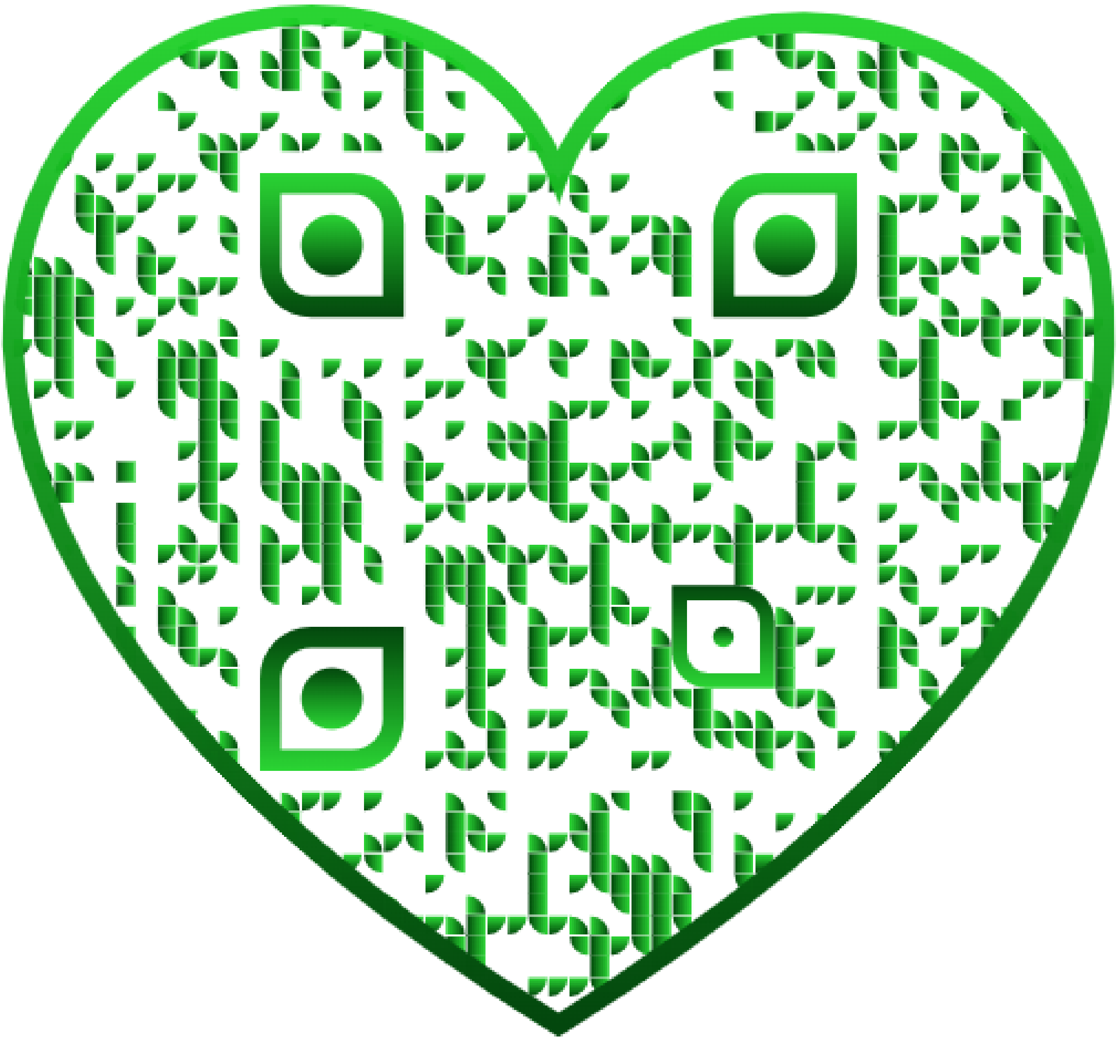
GROWING MONTH BY MONTH

Kitchen Garden

Britain's leading title for growing your own



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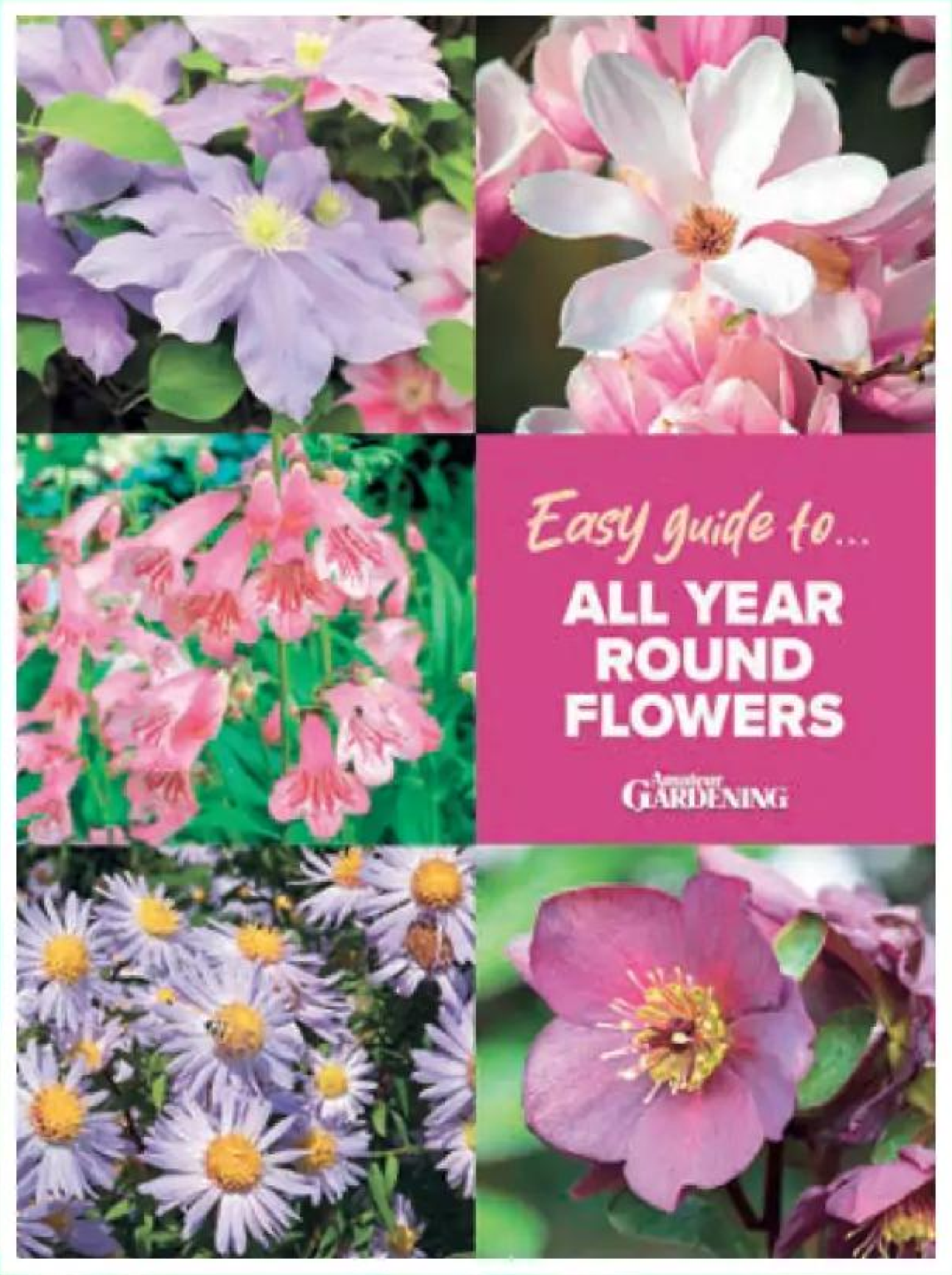
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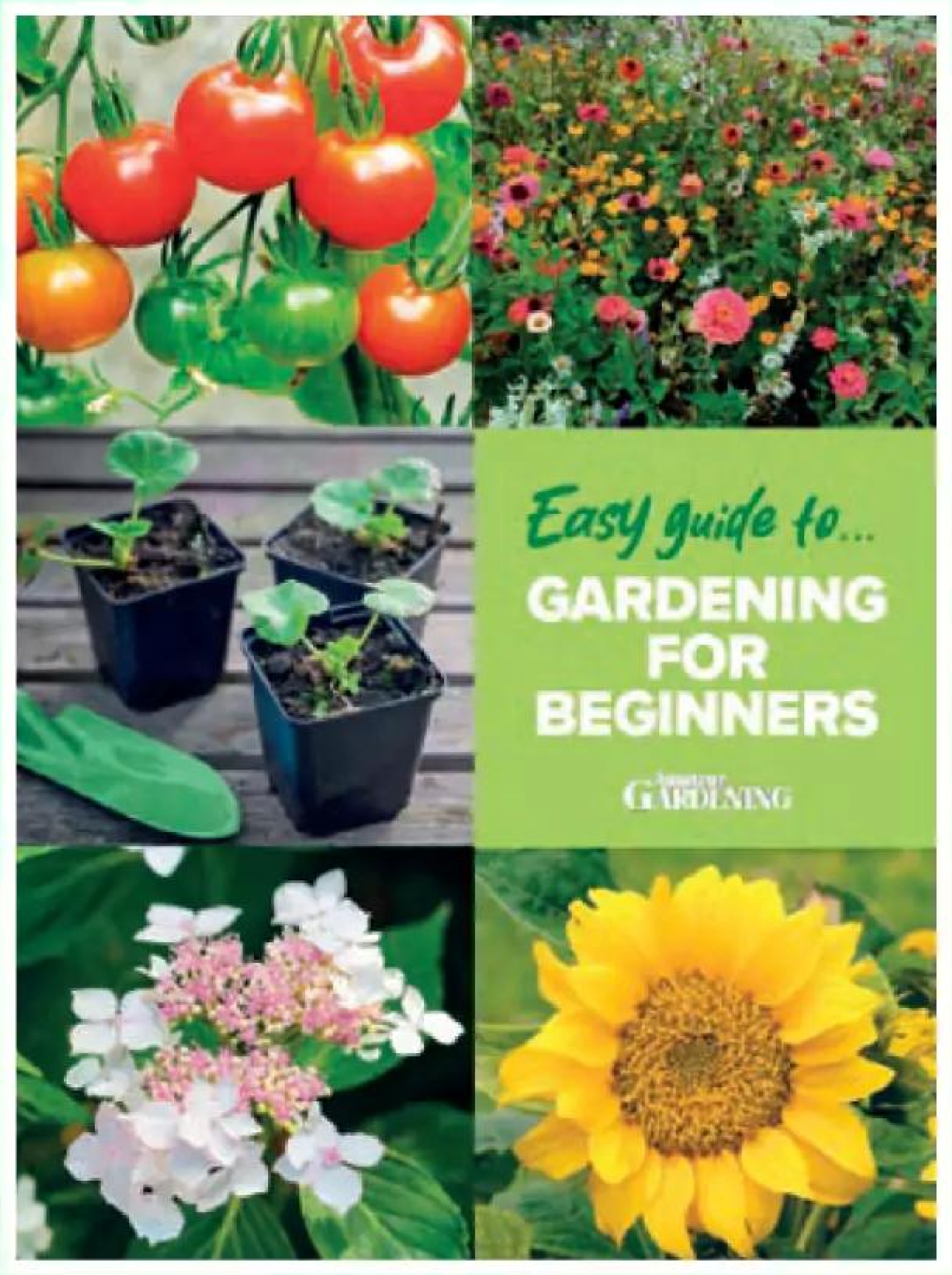
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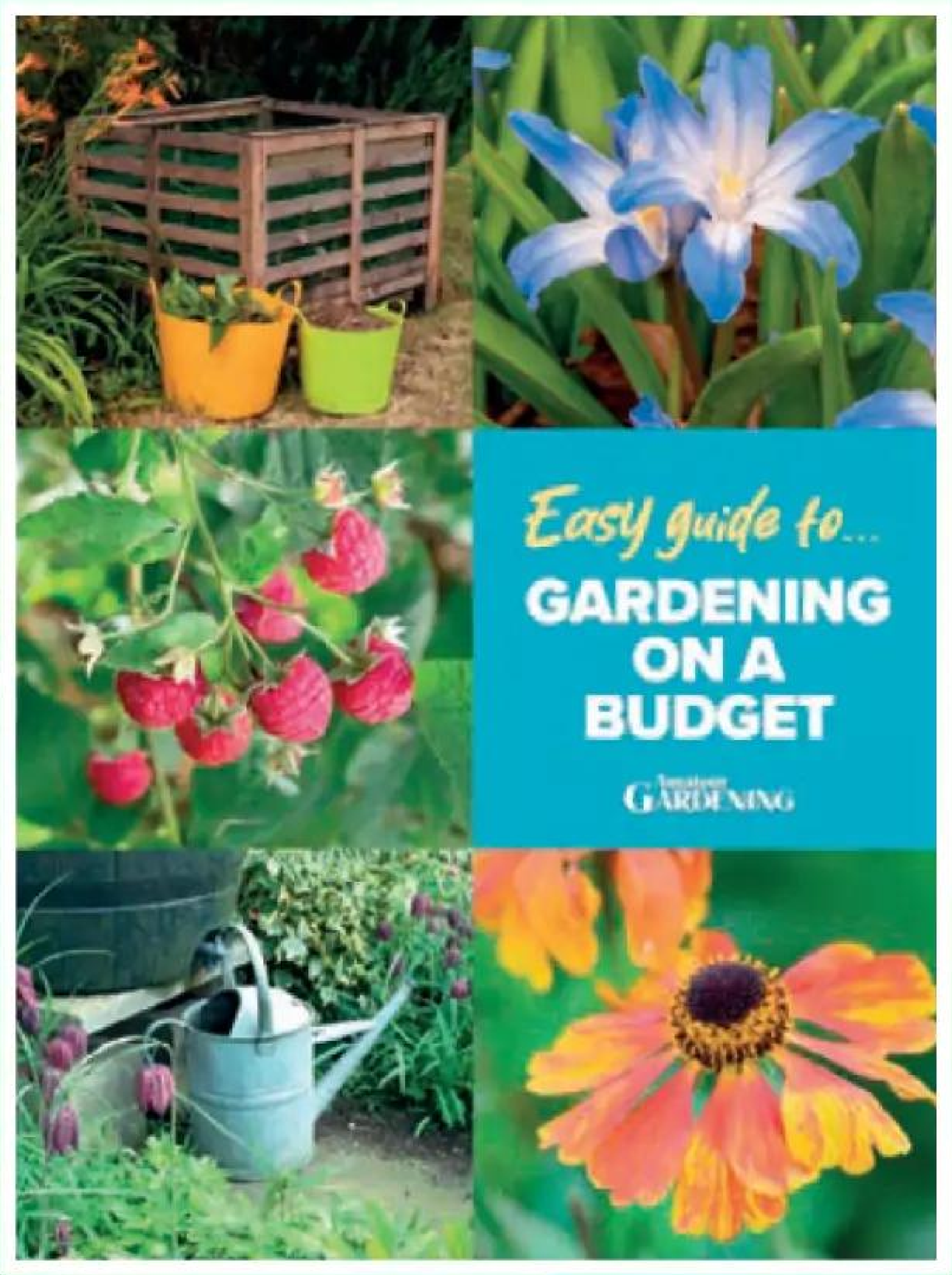
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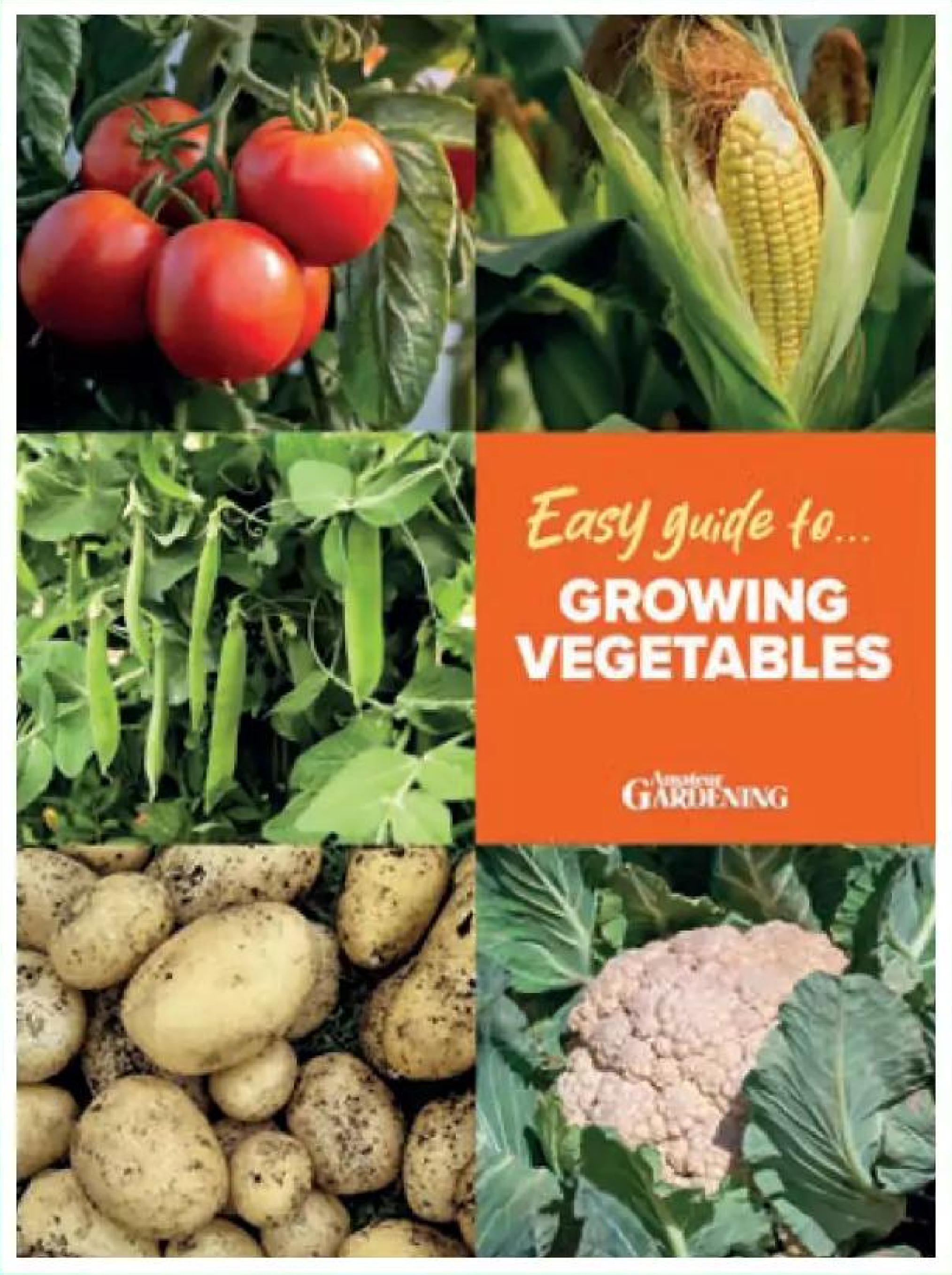
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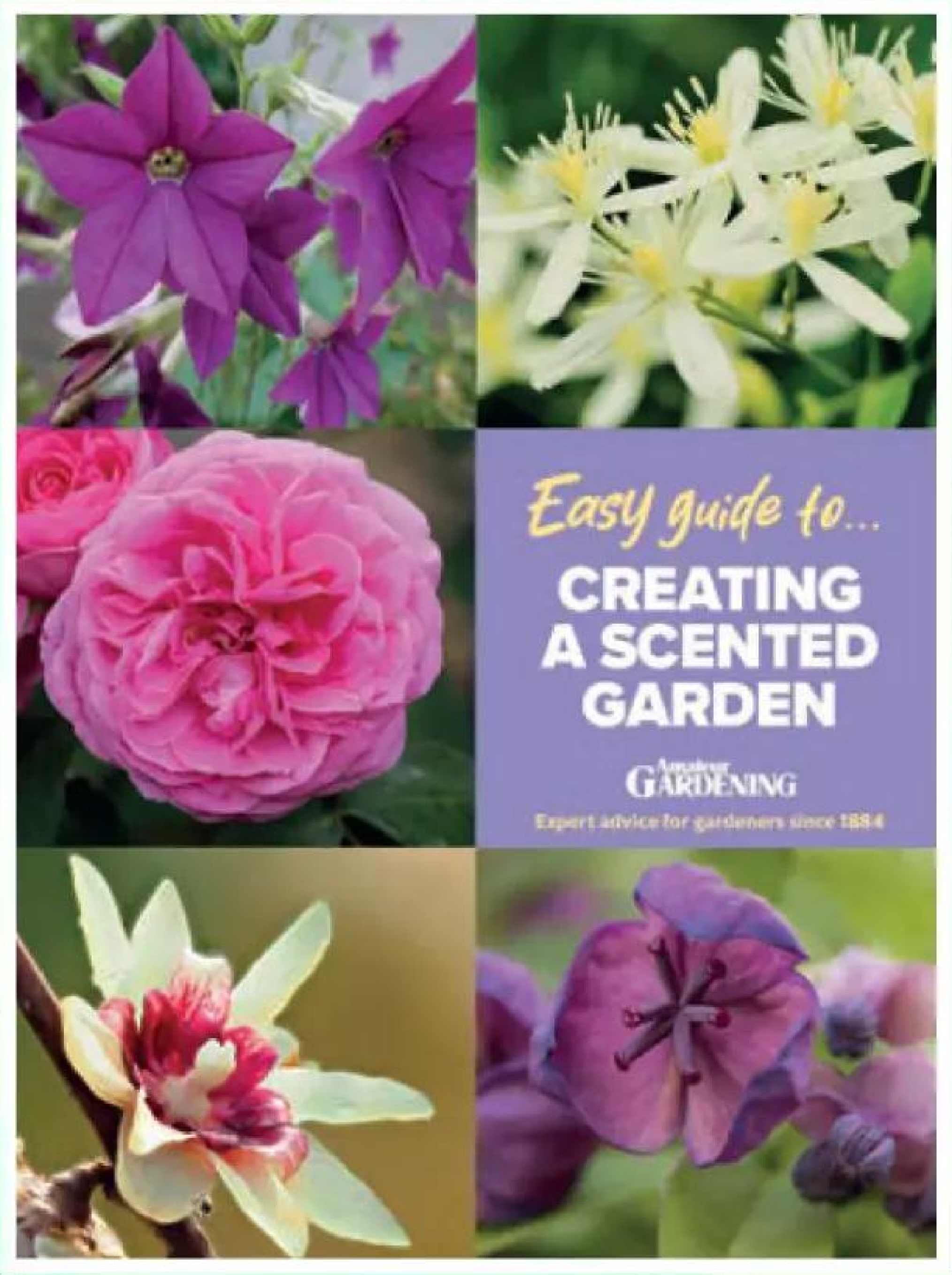
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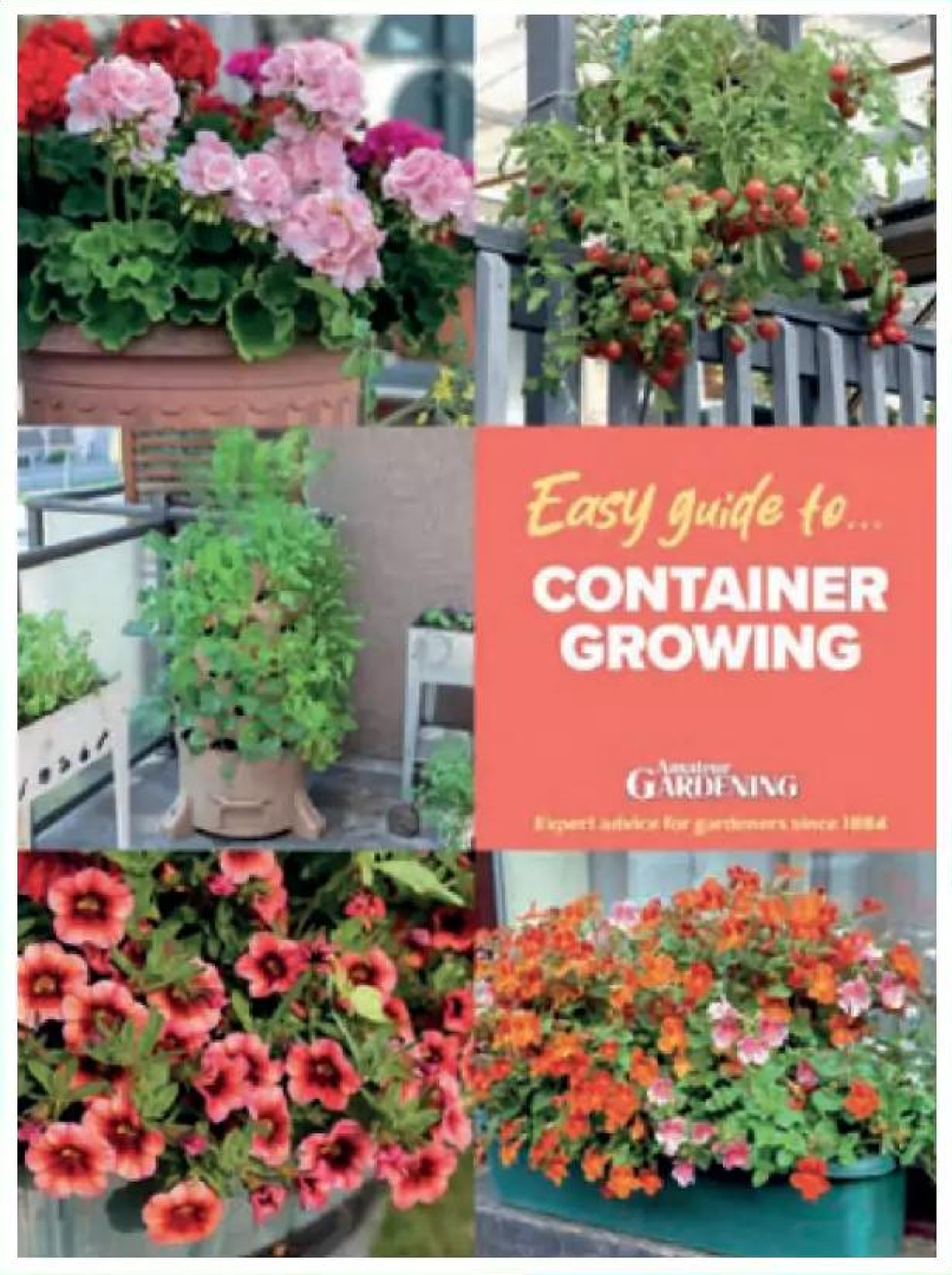
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SEASONAL HIGHLIGHTS

WINTER – SOW ONIONS

SPRING – PLANT A HERB POT

SUMMER – HARVEST BEANS

AUTUMN – LIFT AND STORE CARROTS

WELCOME

Whether you are new to gardening and are growing fruit and vegetables for the first time or an old hand who just wants a reminder of the essential tasks to carry out on your plot each month, this bookazine is for you.

Written by *Kitchen Garden* experts, themselves keen and experienced growers, *Easy Guide to… Growing month by month* takes you through the gardening year, covering many popular crops in detail and offering plenty of top tips along the way.

Each month includes simple step-by-step advice that will help you become familiar with many of the basic techniques you'll need to help you produce fresh, nutritious fruit and vegetables from your garden or allotment all season long. These range from growing strawberries in hanging pots to sowing and planting cabbages and leeks, to propagating fruit and storing onions.

There is also plenty for those with a greenhouse or polytunnel – each month includes lots of advice for growing protected crops, allowing you to take advantage of the warmth and shelter to extend your season by several months.

Finally, if this is your first attempt at growing your own, turn to page 80 to discover gardening expert Emma Rawlings' advice on starting a new veg plot from scratch.

Happy gardening!

Acknowledgement: Month by month words and pictures by *Kitchen Garden* regular contributor Martin Fish unless otherwise stated.

Steve Ott

www.kitchengarden.co.uk

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Editor: Steve Ott
Deputy editor: Emma Rawlings
Writer: Tony Flanagan
Kitchen Garden editor:
Rachel Graham
kg.ed@kelsey.co.uk

Art Editor: Kelvin Clements.

Design: Burda Druck lLtd.

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MONTH BY MONTH AT-A-GLANCE

YOUR INSTANT GUIDE TO THE YEAR'S ESSENTIAL JOBS

JANUARY

PLAN YOUR SOWINGS

Plan what you intend to grow in the garden this season. It's well worth working out some sowing dates for a continuous supply of salads and vegetables.

CLEAR AWAY CABBAGES

As you harvest winter cabbages and Savoys their old stems can be pulled out of the garden to gradually clear the ground.

ORDER POTATOES

Buy seed potatoes as soon as possible to make sure you get the best choice of varieties.

FEBRUARY

FORCE RHUBARB

Cover established rhubarb that wasn't forced last year with a large bucket or forcing pot to exclude all light. This will encourage the tall, very pale sticks that are wonderful to eat in spring.

CLEAN COLD FRAMES

To get ready for the busy growing season in spring give your cold frame a good wash with warm soapy water to remove dirt from the glass and give the frame a good scrub.

PROTECT WITH FLEECE

Protect any early sowings of vegetables such as broad beans with garden fleece. Even if the pots or trays are in a greenhouse or polytunnel the fleece will give a little protection on cold nights.

MARCH

COMPOST BRASSICA STALKS

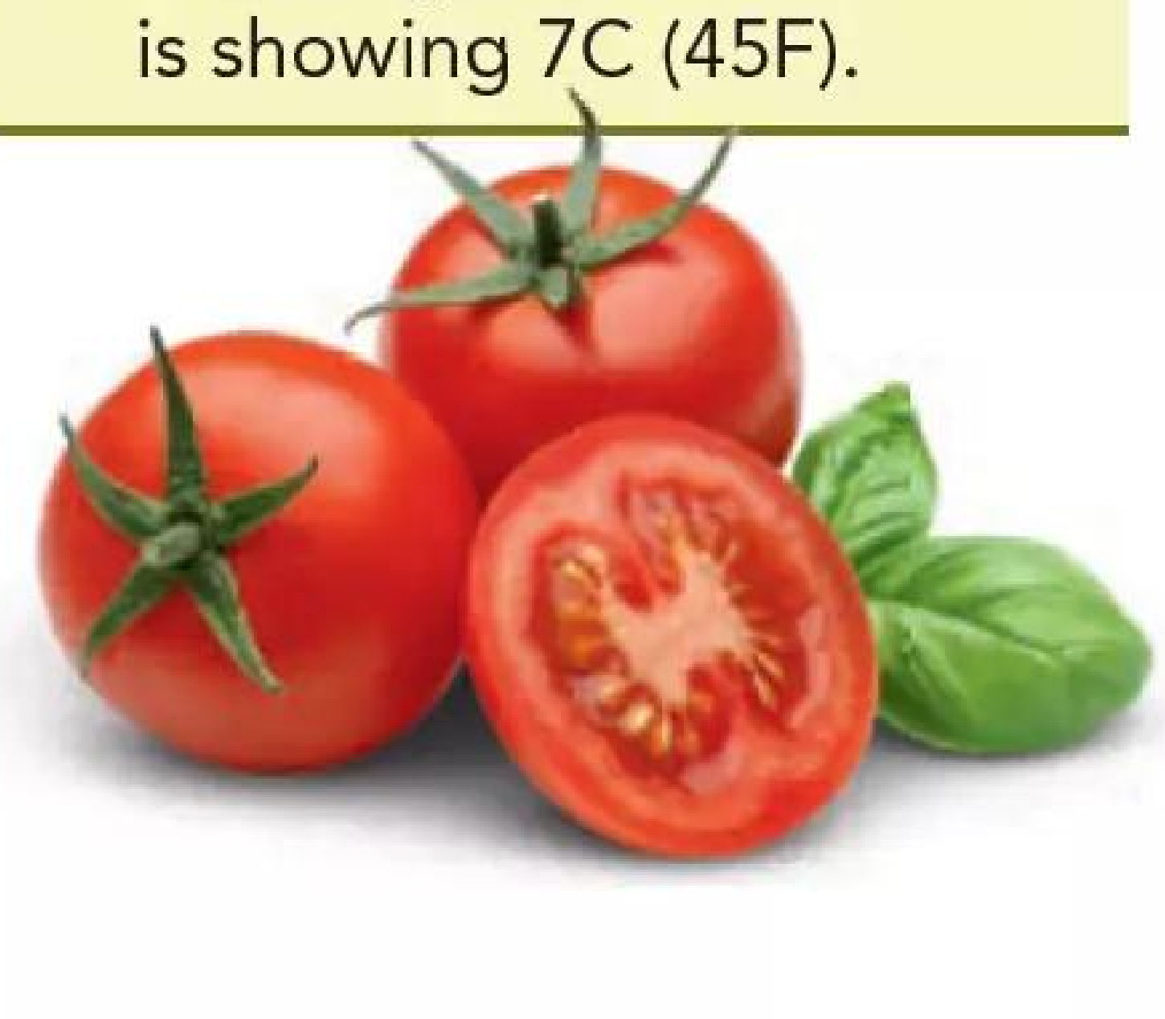
As soon as winter brassicas such as Brussels sprouts and winter kale have been picked, the old stalks can be pulled out of the garden, chopped up and composted.

ATTEND TO RASPBERRY CANES

As summer raspberry canes start into growth, now is a good time to trim off any dead ends to the canes that have died back over the winter. Snip back to a strong, healthy bud.

MONITOR SOIL TEMPERATURE

If you have a probe soil thermometer, push it into the vegetable plot to see what the temperature is a few inches down. Sowing can start once it is showing 7C (45F).



APRIL

CHECK ASPARAGUS

The cutting season traditionally starts on April 23, St George's Day, but in mild weather spears can start to push through a week or two earlier. Start cutting when the spears are 15cm (6in) tall.

FEED SOIL

April and May are the main months for sowing vegetable seeds outside. To make sure the plants have a good supply of nutrients through the growing season, feed the soil before sowing with a general, balanced fertiliser.

PREPARE FOR SOWING

Spring is a busy time and the more you can prepare in advance the better. Take a little time to sort out seed packets into sowing times.

MAY

HARDEN OFF TENDER VEG

Tender vegetables that have been started off under cover can be hardened off over the next few weeks in a cold frame to prepare them for planting out once the danger of frost has passed.

PROTECT POTATOES

In many parts of the country there is still a chance that we'll get some night frosts through May. To protect soft growth such as potatoes pushing through the soil, keep some fleece handy.

THIN YOUNG SEEDLINGS

Spend just a few minutes thinning rows of seedlings when they are large enough to pull out. This will allow them plenty of room to develop and grow properly over the summer.

JUNE

PROTECT PEA SHOOTS

As pea shoots start to push through the garden soil make sure you protect them from hungry pigeons, otherwise they will quickly peck off the new growth.

PINCH OUT BROAD BEANS

Broad beans should be growing well now and well on the way to producing a crop of tasty beans. If not already done, the tips of the plants can be pinched out to deter blackfly.

PLANT LEEK SEEDLINGS

It's now time to plant leeks seedlings out into the garden. If the weather is dry after planting, keep the seedlings watered for a week or two to help them establish a strong root system.

JULY

FEED TOMATOES

It's important that tomato plants get plenty of nutrients, especially potash, so feed once a week with a high potash fertiliser to help the fruits develop and ripen.

CHECK APPLE TREES

When the natural 'June drop' on apples has finished, which is often July in the north, check to see how much fruit has remained. On cooking apples aim for one or two fruits per cluster and on eating varieties leave two or three.

LIFT GARLIC

Lift bulbs of garlic from the garden as you need it or when the foliage starts to die down. When freshly lifted it has a sweet flavour and if allowed to dry naturally it will store for months.

AUGUST

FEED ASPARAGUS

Asparagus should be producing tall, ferny foliage. To help build up the roots for next spring feed the plants with a general fertiliser and water thoroughly in dry weather.

CHECK COMPOST HEAP

If the contents of your heap are very dry they won't break down, so add some water and give everything a good mix-up to get the heap working again.

WATCH OUT FOR BLIGHT

Potato or tomato blight usually starts in warm, humid conditions after a period of damp weather and will show as brown spots on the foliage that if not picked off will spread quickly.

SEPTEMBER

REMOVE OLD CROPS

Once summer crops have finished cropping or when they run to seed, chop them up and add to the compost heap. The ground can then be prepared for planting spring cabbages.

HARVEST GARLIC

If you haven't lifted your spring planted garlic, now is the time to ease the bulbs out of the soil with a fork. Dry and store for winter use.

CHECK APPLES

As a rule of thumb, apples are ready to pick when the fruits leave the tree without too much pulling. If you have to tug, try them in another week.

OCTOBER

HOE WEEDS

Weeds will make a last attempt to grow and produce seed before winter sets in. Use a Dutch hoe and chop off any seedlings at soil level while they are small.

BUY GARLIC BULBS

Buy bulbs of garlic for autumn planting from local garden centres or specialist growers. These will be varieties that are suitable for growing in our climate.

EXPOSE RHUBARB CROWNS

As soon as we start to get some cold nights the large leaves of rhubarb collapse and turn yellow. Pull the old growth from the plant to expose the crown to the cold weather.

NOVEMBER

CHECK APPLES

Check apples that are being stored for winter use and pick out any that are turning soft or starting to show rot, as it develops very quickly and will spread to other fruits.

CLEAR GUTTERS

The leaves on trees are falling fast now and it's important that you make sure they are not blocking gutters and down pipes on sheds and greenhouses.

INSPECT FIG FRUIT

Check over fig trees and pinch off any fruits that are larger than your little fingernail as these won't overwinter. Any very small, embryo fruits in the tips of the branches should be left on.

DECEMBER

PROTECT BROAD BEAN PLANTS

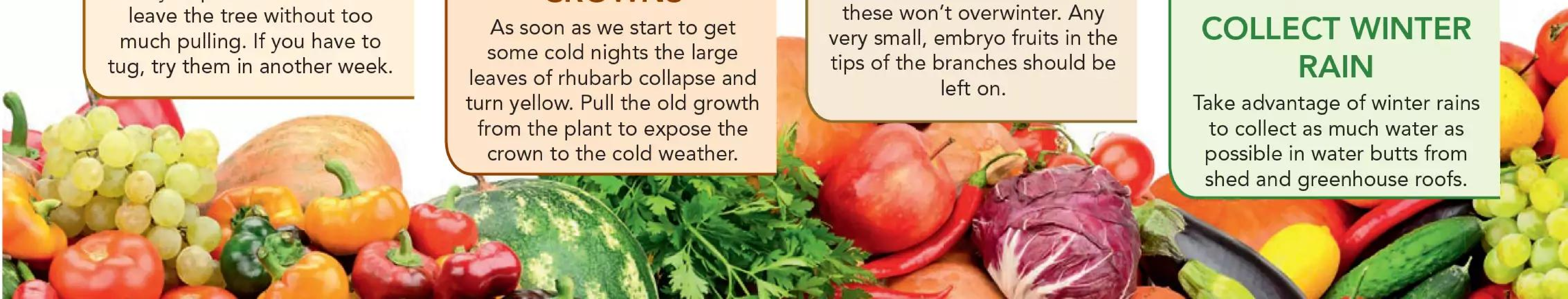
Broad beans sown in October or November should be through now and making strong plants in the plot. If birds are a problem, cover them over with wire netting.

WEED BETWEEN CABBAGES

Always keep young spring cabbage plants weed free. It's also a good idea to use a hoe to draw up a little soil around the stems to prevent them from rocking in windy weather.

COLLECT WINTER RAIN

Take advantage of winter rains to collect as much water as possible in water butts from shed and greenhouse roofs.



JANUARY

10 MINUTE JOBS

PICK KALE LEAVES

One of the hardiest of winter veg is the Tuscan or black kale. It's a very tasty leaf vegetable and is packed full of goodness. Picking it is very simple and it only takes a few minutes to pull off enough leaves for a meal.

STOCK UP ON FERTILISERS

Before spring, check what dried fertilisers you have in the shed, such as Growmore, dried pellets, blood, fish and bone and work out if you'll have enough for the coming season. If not get stocked up, so that come the growing season you'll be prepared.

ORDER SEED POTATOES

If you buy your seed potatoes by mail order, get your order in as soon as possible to make sure you can get the varieties that you want. Alternatively, if you buy from a local garden centre or nursery, give them a call to ask when they'll be in.

INSULATE OUTDOOR TAPS

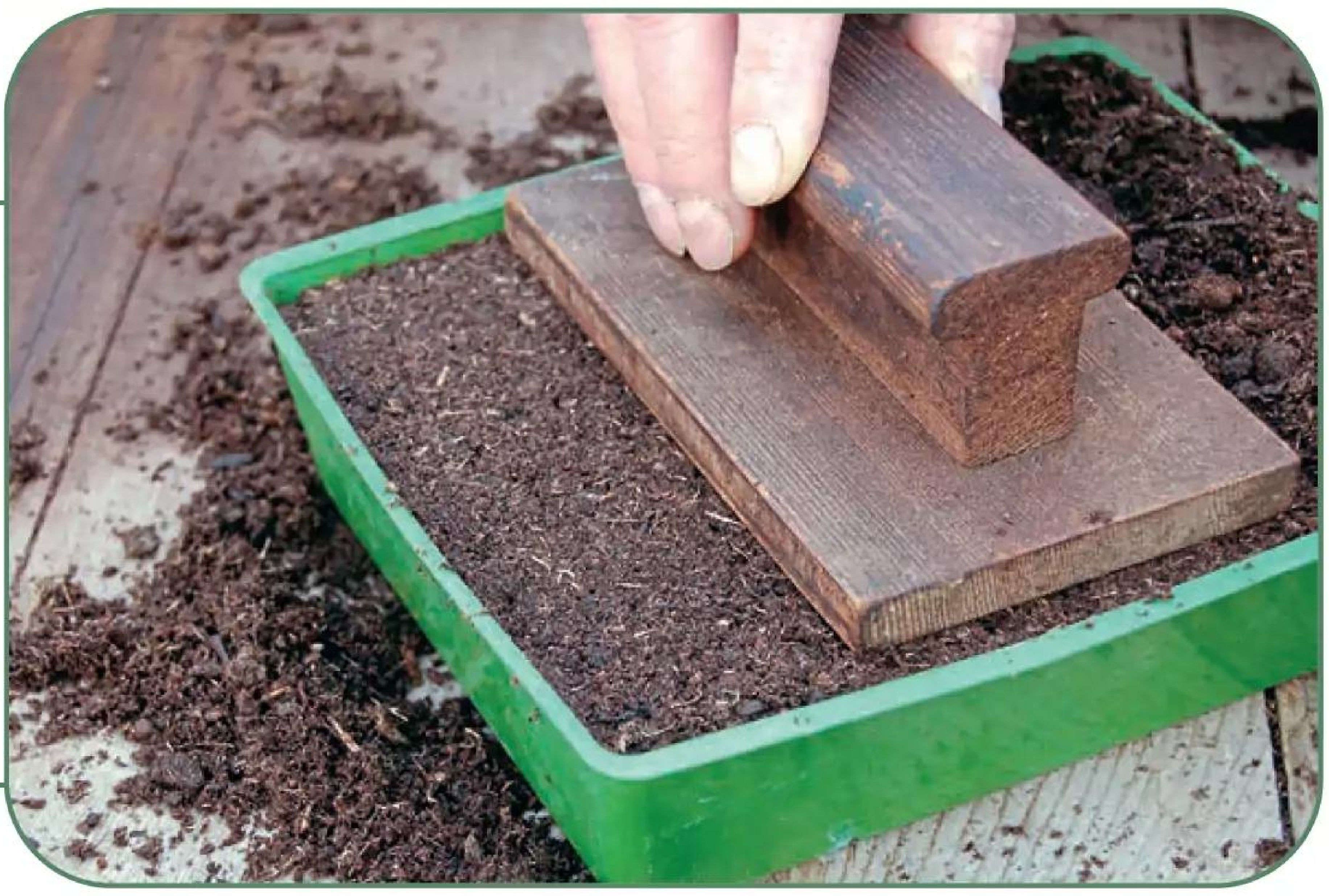
In frosty weather check outdoor taps to make sure they are well insulated and if not, wrap them in fleece, hessian or fit a polystyrene cover. Better still, isolate the tap at the stop-cock to prevent pipes freezing and only turn it on when needed.

CHECK GREASE BANDS

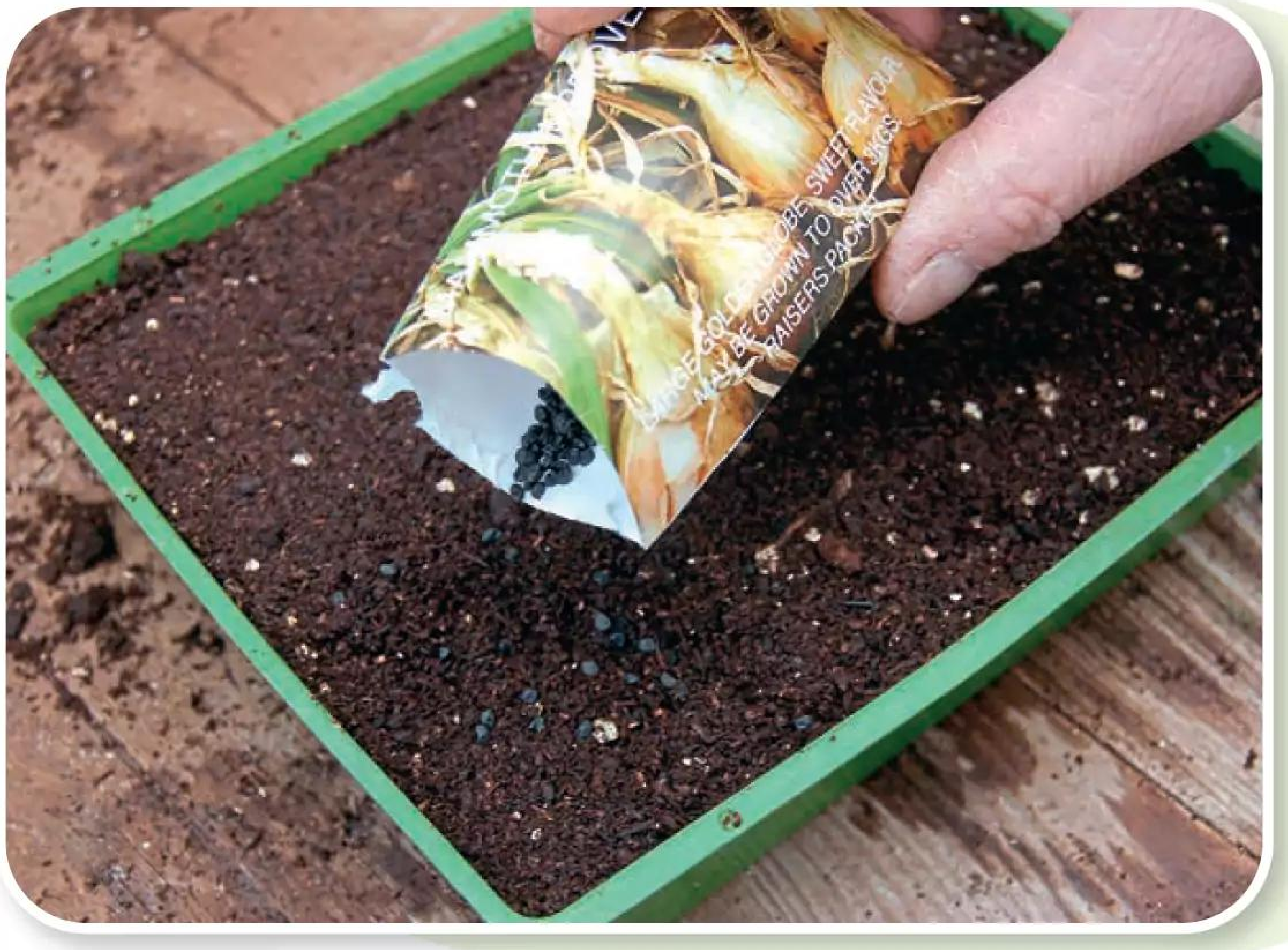
If you fitted grease bands around your fruit trees in autumn to prevent the wingless females of the winter moth from climbing the trunk to lay eggs, check the bands now and change for fresh bands, or apply some fresh grease if they are drying out.

STEP BY STEP

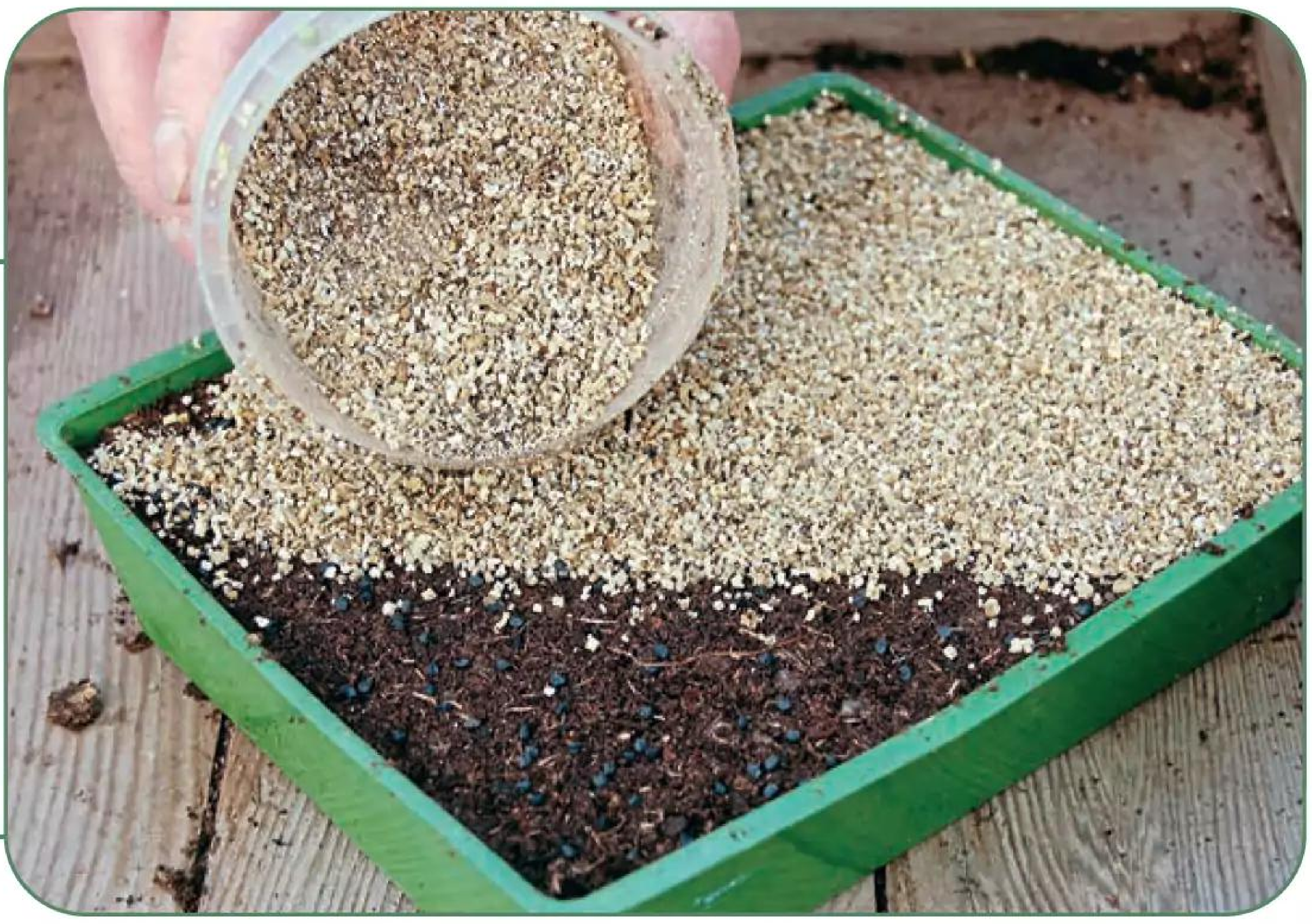
SOWING ONIONS



STEP 1: For good germination, use either a John Innes compost or mix or half and half John Innes and a decent quality multipurpose. Over-fill the tray with compost, strike it off level with the top of the tray and then use a presser board to gently firm the compost down approximately 10mm (½in) from the top of the tray. What we want is a level, even, lightly firmed surface.



STEP 2: Even sowing, not too thickly is very important to get an even batch of quality seedlings that will all grow at the same rate. Sow the seeds straight from the packet, sowing evenly across the whole surface. Onion seeds are black and angular and difficult to see on the compost, but if you get down low and look across the compost you can see them.



STEP 3: Covering is just as important and whatever you use it needs to be an even thickness. If using compost use a fine sieve and cover with approximately 5mm (¼in) of compost. Alternatively, use vermiculite which is very easy to spread over the seeds. It's very good at maintaining moisture around the seeds while they are germinating and the seedlings can push through without any problems.

REMOVE DEAD LEAVES FROM LEEKS

Leeks are a great winter vegetable to grow in the garden and it's possible to have them in season from October through until May. Generally speaking, they are fairly easy to grow and being hardy they can remain outside in the garden all winter.

At this time of the year when the leeks are ready to harvest it's natural for the lower leaves to shrivel, either as a result of lack of light or fungal infection similar to grey mould. Although not harmful to the main plant, it's a good idea to clear the old leaves from around the plants and dispose of them. This helps keep the leeks healthy and prevents diseases spreading.

PURPLE SPROUTING BROCCOLI

One vegetable we always look forward to in March and April is purple sprouting broccoli. The tasty heads are full of flavour and come at a time when other winter veg is coming to an end, making them very welcome. From sowing to harvesting is almost a year, but it's worth the wait. The plants can grow to be tall and very often they get top heavy and topple over and lay along the ground. To give them some support and keep them upright, use short, stout canes pushed into the soil at the side of the plants and tie them securely with soft string.

SOW NOW

Onions, lettuce and salad leaves, broad beans – all under cover with heat.

PLANT NOW

Soft fruit bushes, cane fruit and fruit trees, garlic in pots, rhubarb.

HARVEST

Brussels sprouts, winter cauliflower, kale, Savoy, winter cabbage, leeks, celeriac, chard, Swede, Jerusalem artichokes, spinach, parsnips.

IN STORE

Apples, pears, potatoes, beetroot, carrots, squash, pumpkin, onions, shallots.

PRUNE REDCURRANTS

Red and white currants can be summer and winter pruned. The aim when pruning is to develop an open framework of old wood from which grow lots of side shoots. The growth made last summer can be shortened to form short fruiting spurs along the older stems. Any congested growth can also be thinned out slightly and tall vertical shoots reduced to keep the shrub in hand.

APPLE TREE PRUNING

Continue to prune apple trees, but don't get carried away and prune out too much wood as this will simply encourage even more strong new growth in spring. Winter pruning should be structural to develop a good framework. Any crossing branches can be removed and if the centre of the tree is congested, thin it out a little. Tall vertical growth can be reduced to a lower, side-ways growing branch.

PLAN A CROP ROTATION

There are many benefits of rotating crops each season (i.e. not growing the same crops in the same soil every year) and it can certainly help to prevent a build-up of pests and diseases in the soil. With a four-year rotation, each plot is composted or manured every other year which keeps the soil in good condition.

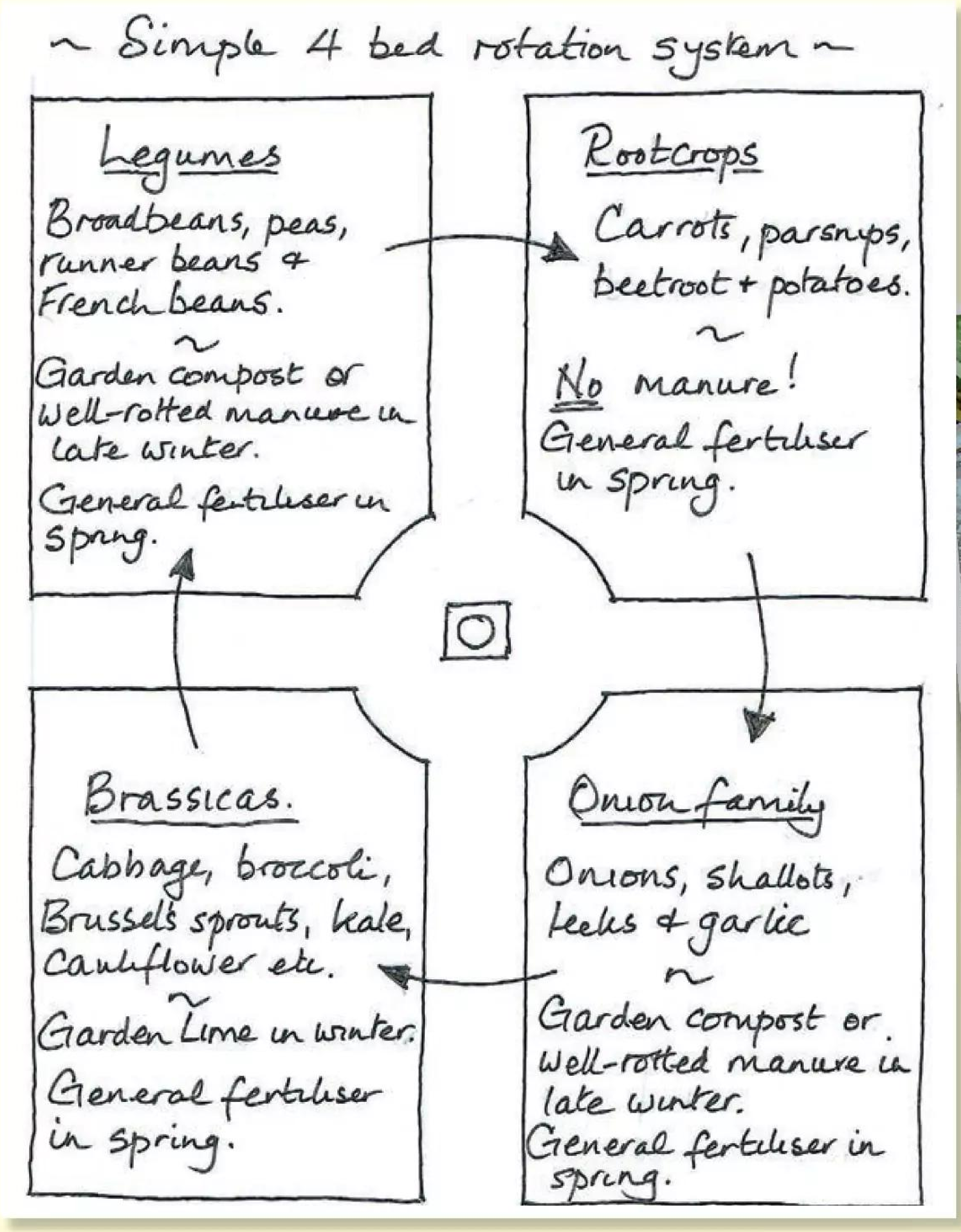
A four-year rotation consists of four beds, but if growing on a large plot or allotment, you can divide the area into four sections. Beds are used to grow legumes, root-crops, onions and brassicas and the crops rotate clockwise a bed each year, meaning it's four years before the same crops are grown in that bed again. For crops that don't fit into the rotation such as salads, courgettes and sweetcorn, simply plant them in one of the other beds where there is space.

The brassica bed follows on from legumes and they can take advantage of the nitrogen fixing nodules left in the soil from peas and beans. The bed is dug over in late winter, with no added compost or manure. After digging, garden lime is applied to maintain alkaline conditions and allowed to wash in naturally. General fertiliser such as Growmore or blood, fish and bone is applied before planting.

Onions, including garlic, shallots and leeks follow on from the brassicas and take advantage of the lime residue. This bed is composted or manured when it's dug and in spring it receives a dressing of general fertiliser to give the onions a good start.

Root vegetables such as early potatoes, carrots, parsnips follow on from the onion bed. The soil is dug over in winter and left until spring when it's raked down and general fertiliser is applied a week or so before sowing or planting. No compost or manure is used in this bed.

The legume bed where peas and beans are grown follows roots and is dug in late winter, composted or manured and fertiliser is applied in spring to supply additional nutrients.


~ Simple 4 bed rotation system ~
Legumes
Broadbeans, peas, runner beans & French beans.
~
Garden compost or well-rotted manure in late winter.
General fertiliser in spring.
Rootcrops
Carrots, parsnips, beetroot + potatoes.
~
No manure!
General fertiliser in spring.
Brassicas.
Cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kale, Cauliflower etc.
~
Garden Lime in winter.
General fertiliser in spring.
Onion family
Onions, shallots, leeks & garlic
~
Garden compost or well-rotted manure in late winter.
General fertiliser in spring.

Do it now

- Cold frames that are used to overwinter plants or that will be needed in spring can be given a good wash down to clean the glass and wash off algae

- Carry on digging the veg plot when conditions are suitable. The golden rule is never dig in very wet conditions as it puddles the ground, or when it is frozen solid.

- As the new seed catalogues arrive, spend a little time looking though them and decide what varieties you want to grow this year and get them ordered as soon as possible.

- Check vegetables and fruit in store as by this time of the some of them will be starting to show signs of rot. Any that are spoiling need removing as using straight away.

- On wet days when you can't garden, give the shed a good sweep out and clean your tools to get them ready for spring.

IN THE GREENHOUSE

PREPARE FOR GROWING

January is one of the least productive months in the greenhouse and polytunnel, when it comes to harvesting crops, but it's a time when there is lots of preparation to do ready for the new growing season.

Making sure the glass in the greenhouse or polythene on the polytunnel is clean is something that needs doing before the main growing season. A bucket of warm, soapy water and a car-washing brush is ideal to scrub off dirt and algae which will instantly allow more light to new crops in spring. While you've got the bucket of warm water, it's also a good idea to give the propagator a good wash down to remove dirt and fungal spores to help seedlings get off to a healthy start.

WHAT TO DO IN JANUARY

1 Clear out the last of any winter crops that have now finished, chop them up and add to the compost heap.

2 Prune back tall shrubs and over-hanging branches on trees that cast shadows on the greenhouse.

3 Check perennial herbs in pots and if the compost is starting to dry out, give them a little water.

4 Make sure you've got your seed order in if you buy from a mail order company, to get the varieties you want.

5 Check garlic cloves that were started into growth in pots last autumn and keep them just moist.

6 Tidy pots and seed trays and dispose of any that are broken or no longer used.

POT STRAWBERRY PLANTS

For an early crop of strawberries in May and June, now is the time to bring some plants under cover to start them into growth. Strawberries need a period of cold weather outside to break their winter dormancy, but when brought under cover in mid to late January, they soon start to wake up and make new growth. Last year's runners can be lifted from the garden, or new plants in small pots can be potted into larger containers or hanging baskets using good quality compost. Keep the compost moist and stand the pots on a bench in a light position. Even without any artificial heat, the plants will flower and produce delicious fruit a few weeks earlier than plants growing in the garden.

FEBRUARY

10 MINUTE JOBS

SPREAD COMPOST

When you get a little spare time on the plot, start to dig out well-rotted compost from the compost heap or bin and tip it around the garden in piles where needed. If the ground is frozen hard, all the better to prevent making a mess.

WASH POTS AND TRAYS

It's always good to start the growing season with clean pots and trays, so when it's too cold or wet to garden, spend a little time in the shed with a bucket of warm soapy water and give your plant pots and seed trays a good wash.

CHIT POTATOES

When you buy or take delivery of early varieties of seed potatoes start to 'chit' them straight away to prepare them for planting in several weeks' time. The ideal conditions for this is a light cool place to encourage short, stocky growth.

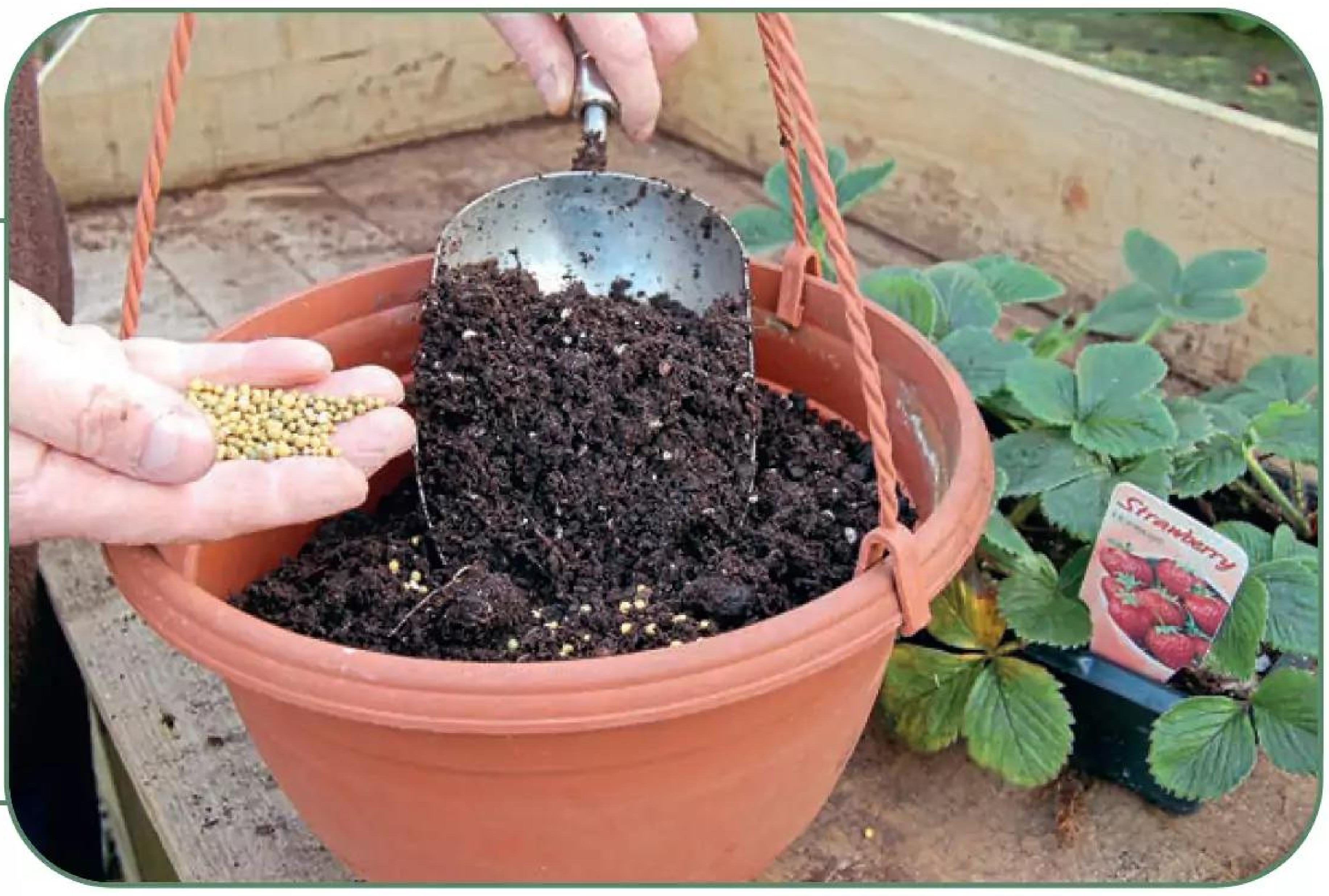
HEEL IN FRUIT BUSHES

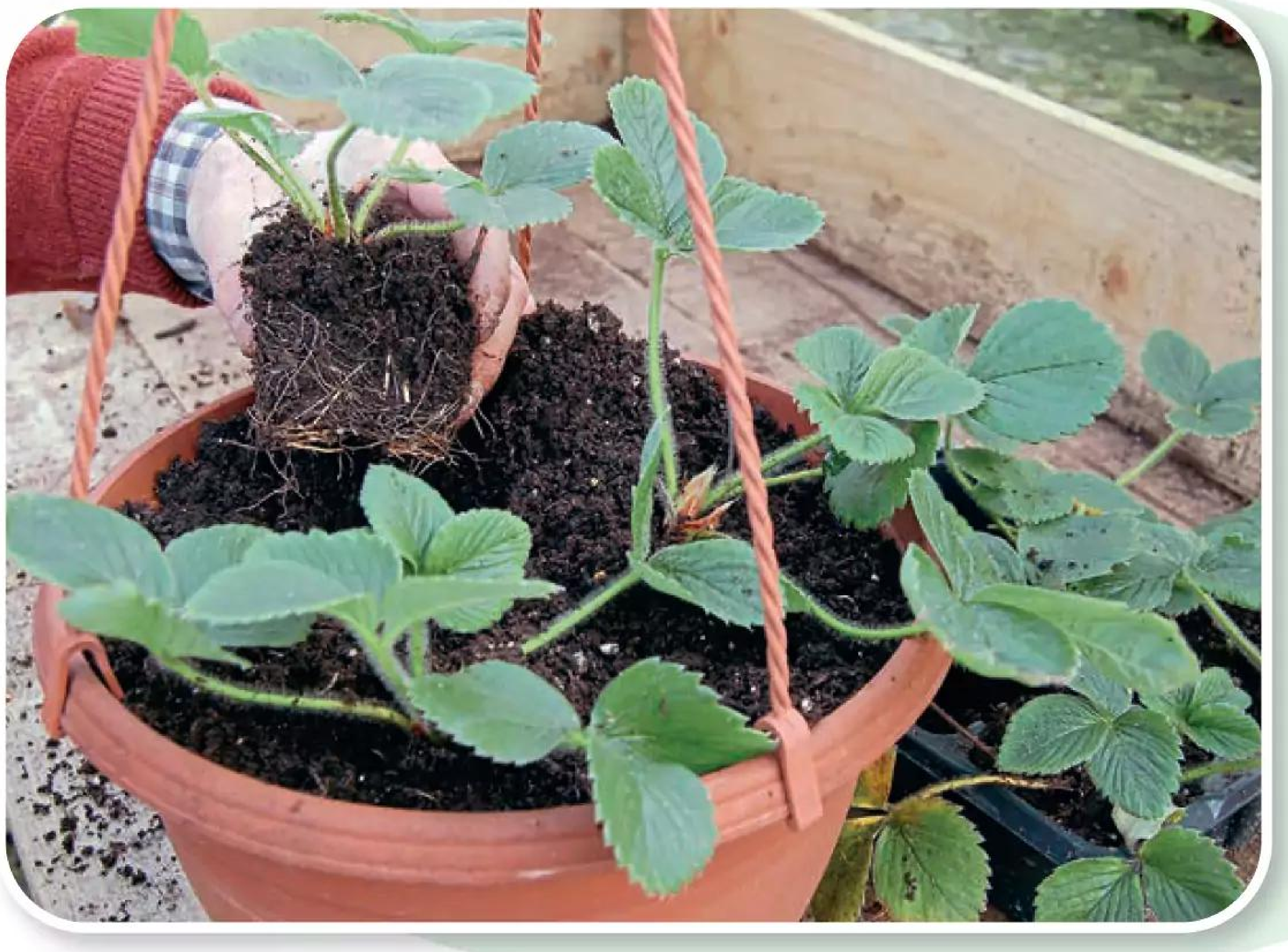
Fruit trees and bushes that were planted in the autumn or over winter can be checked to make sure the roots haven't been loosened in frosty weather. If the soil is soft or the roots have been heaved out, firm them with the heel of your boot.

STEP BY STEP

PLANT STRAWBERRIES IN HANGING POTS

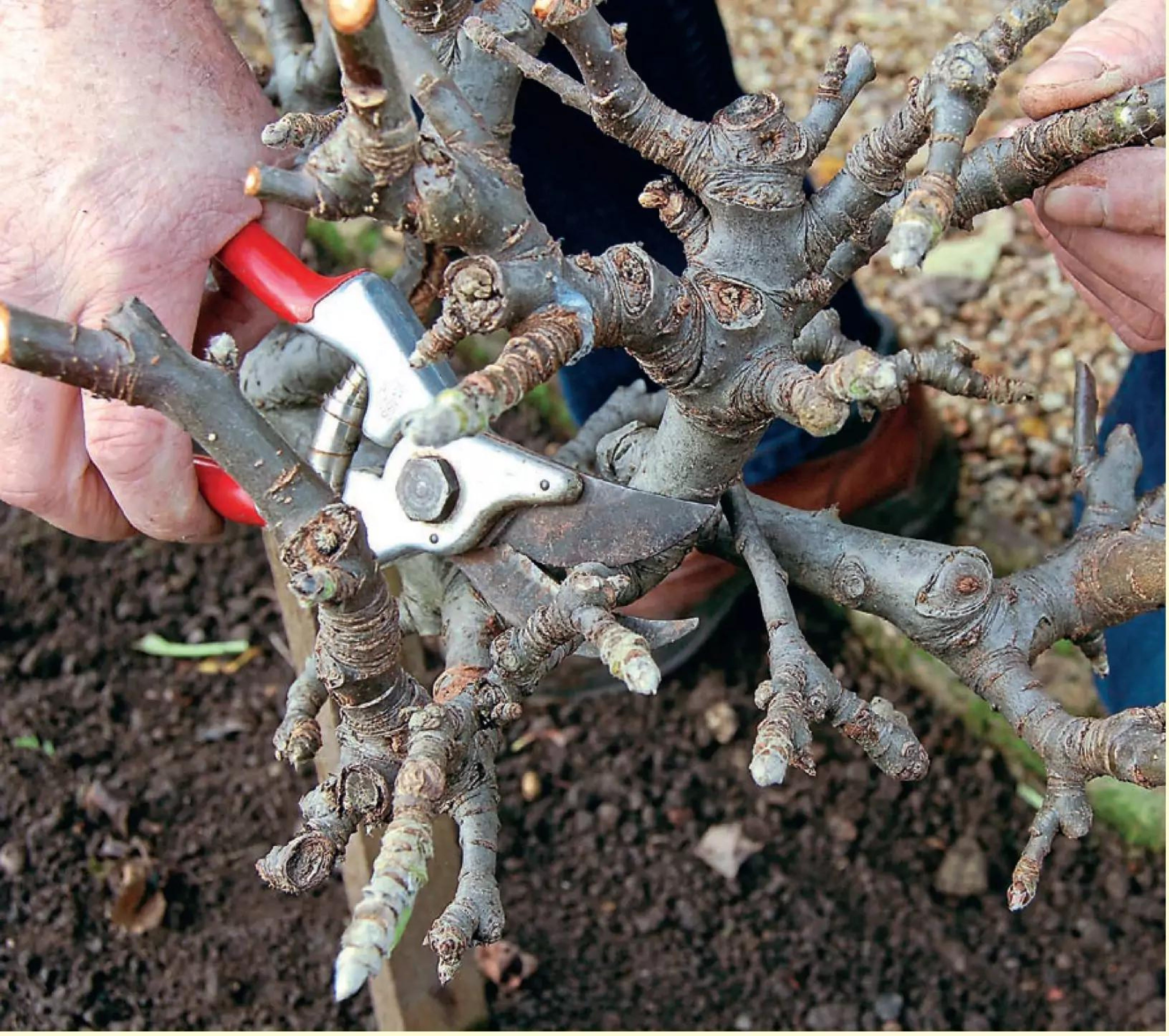
STEP 1: It is easy to grow strawberries in hanging pots and it certainly makes picking the fruit easier. Now is a good time to pot up young plants to produce a crop this summer. For healthy growth always use a good compost. Mix two-thirds multipurpose and one-third John Innes together to supply plenty of nutrients to the plants all summer long. You can also add in a little slow release fertiliser.





STEP 2: In a 25cm (10in) container plant three strawberries. These are runners rooted late last summer that have been grown in cell trays, but nurseries may still have bare root plants for sale or pot grown runners. Plant around the edge of the basket making sure the crown (large central growth bud) is at compost level. Too deep and it can rot and too shallow, the plants will rock around.

STEP 3: Once planted and the compost lightly firmed, give the plants a water to settle their roots and the compost. Although hardy, keep the plants in a sheltered part of the garden, or better still stand them in a cold frame, cold greenhouse or polytunnel while the roots establish. Keep the compost moist and in April, hang them out, or keep them under cover for an early crop of delicious strawberries.

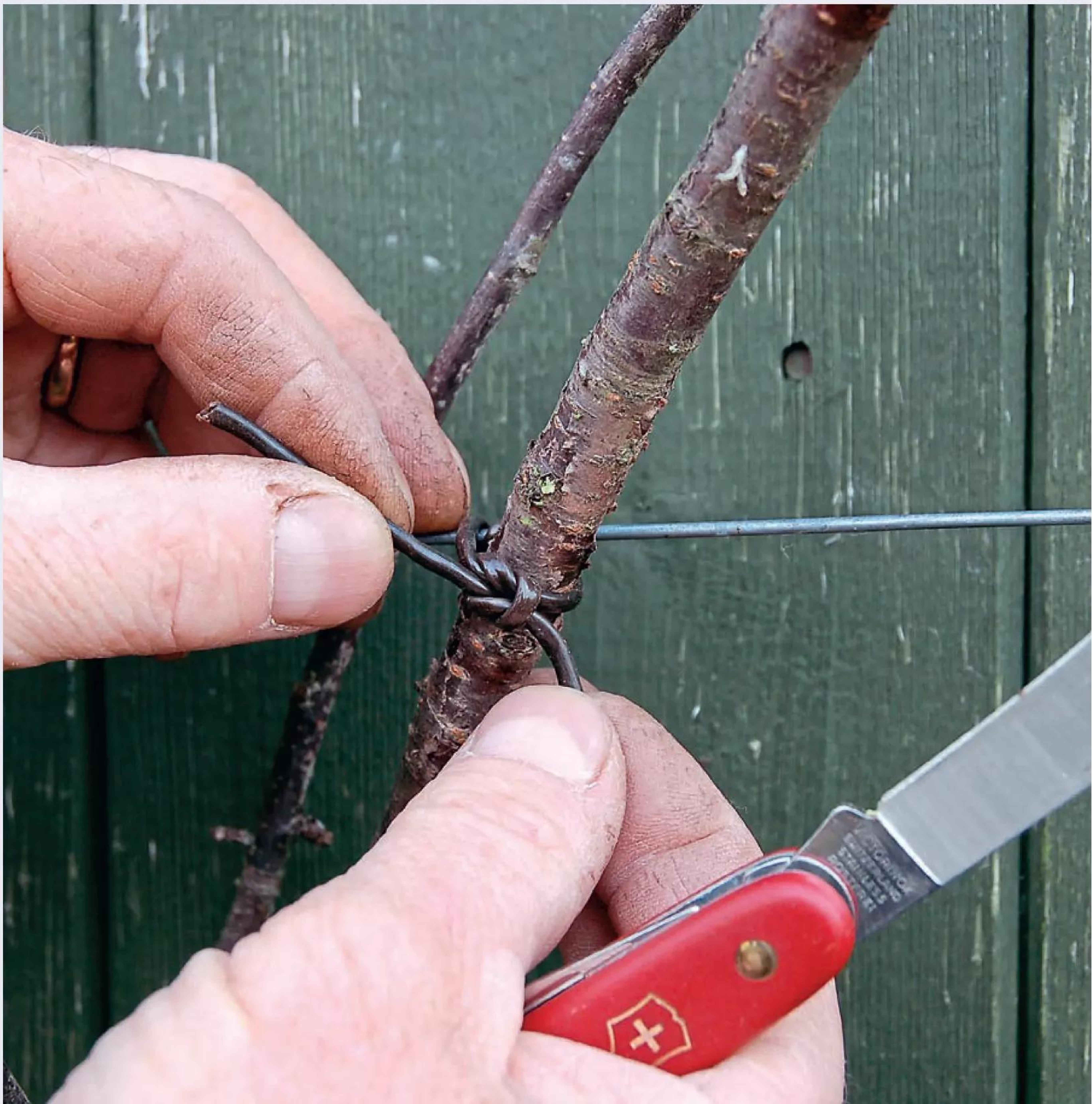


THIN FRUITING SPURS ON APPLES

A great way to grow apples where there isn't much space is to train them as cordons, espaliers or as a step-over. This way you can grow several varieties in a small area and these trained forms also look very decorative. Pruning trained trees is simple and most of the pruning is done in late summer by cutting the current season's growth back to the establish framework of branches to create short fruiting spurs. This is done every year to keep the tree in its trained shape, but after several years, the clusters of spurs get a little longer each year and they can become crowded and congested. This can happen to mature step-over apple trees so it's now a good time to prune. Thin out and reduce the length of them by simply cutting out and shortening some of the established spurs to allow more space between them.

RE-TIE CHERRY BRANCHES TO WIRES

Check over trained fruit trees and bushes to make sure they are securely tied to their support wires. You can use garden twine which after a couple of seasons rots and needs replacing. You can also purchase a rubber, stretchy string that is very tough and will last for many years and it also expands as the branch grows. This will hopefully prevent the tie damaging the branches.



SOW NOW

Onions, lettuce, salad leaves, broad beans, early peas and carrots under cloches.

PLANT NOW

Soft fruit bushes, cane fruit and fruit trees, garlic, rhubarb, Jerusalem artichokes, shallots.

HARVEST

Brussels sprouts, winter cauliflower, kale, Savoy, winter cabbage, leeks, celeriac, Swiss chard, swede, Jerusalem artichokes, spinach, parsnips.

IN STORE

Apples, potatoes, beetroot, carrots, onions, shallots.

LIME THE BRASSICA PLOT

If you practise crop rotation, the plot where you are intending to grow brassicas can be treated with garden lime to raise the pH slightly. All brassicas prefer an alkaline soil and even on a neutral soil always add a little extra lime to the plot. Not only does the lime create the correct soil conditions, it also can help against soil borne diseases such as clubroot which can be a serious problem on brassicas, especially in acid soil conditions. Sprinkle two or three handfuls per square metre, and allow the rain to slowly wash it down into the soil. If in doubt, carry out a soil pH test before applying.

USE CLOCHES TO WARM SOIL

There is a lot of folklore in gardening and one old saying warns that "As the day lengthens, so the cold strengthens". That's often true in February, which can sometimes be a cold month, so don't rush into planting and sowing too early! What you can do now to help warm up the soil for when you do want to start growing is cover an area with cloches. They will keep the rain off, allowing already wet soil to dry out a little and warm up a degree or two. It also means that when you do start sowing, the soil will be friable and easy to rake down to a seed bed.

PLANT RASPBERRY CANES

We'll soon be at the end of the bare-root planting season, but there is still time to plant raspberry canes over the next month. Nurseries, garden centres and mail-order companies should still have canes available, but you'll need to get them as soon as you can.

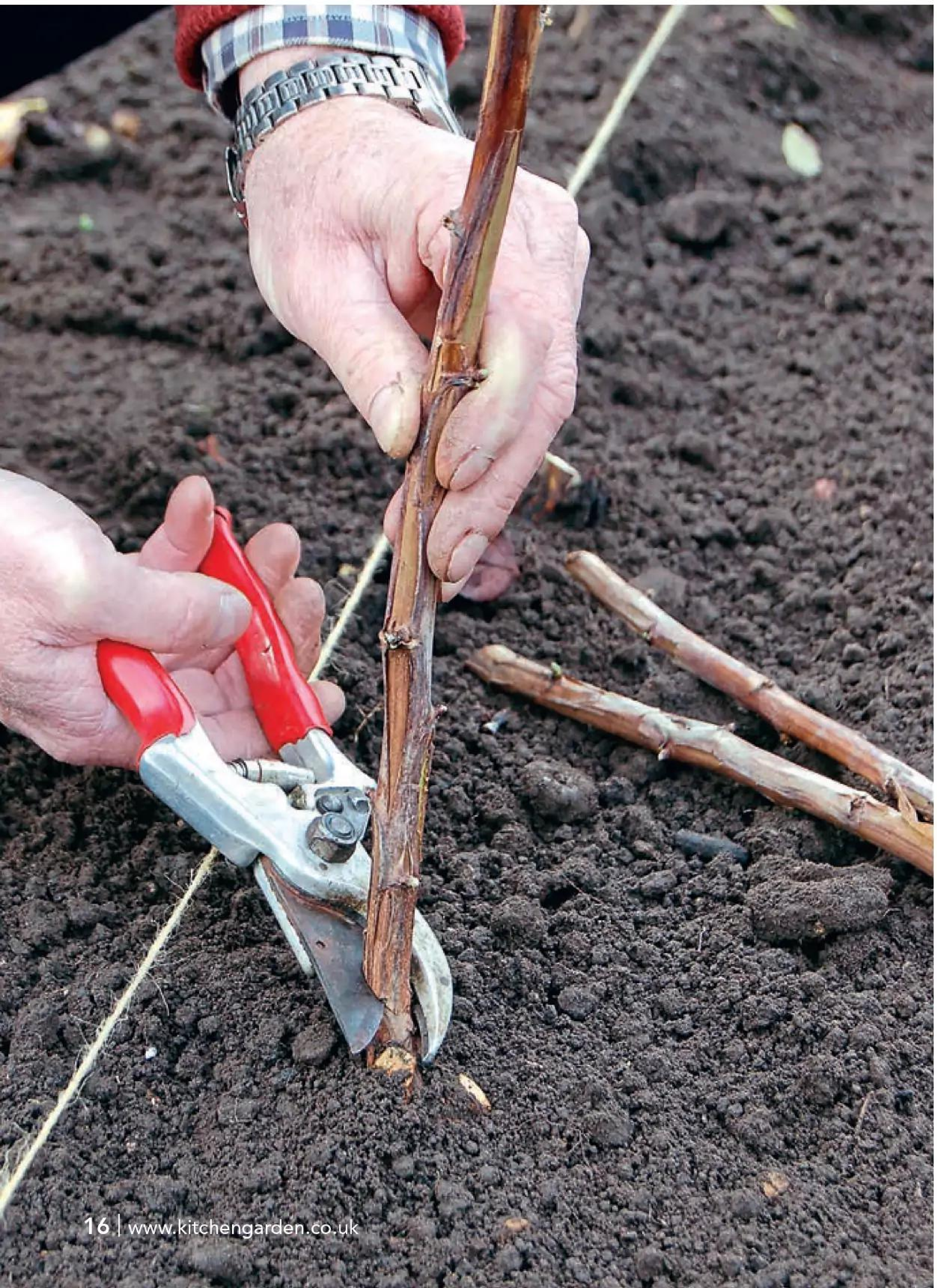
When it comes to planting, summer and autumn fruiting raspberries are treated exactly the same way. They also both need the same growing conditions which is a well-drained, moisture retentive soil and a sunny position.

As for varieties, there are some really good ones that will produce good crops of sweet fruits. For summer berries try, 'Malling Juno', 'Glen Ample' or 'Glen Fyne' and for autumn fruiting 'Joan J', 'Polka' or 'Autumn Treasure'. All are very good, modern varieties that crop well. If you are replacing old plants, you will need to plant on a fresh area of ground where raspberries haven't been grown for a few years.

When planting, ground preparation is important. The area needs to have been dug over and all perennial roots removed, Mix in plenty of organic matter in the form of garden compost or well-rotted manure to improve the soil and help to get them off to a good start.

Dig a trench the width and depth of the spade in the prepared ground along a string line to keep the row straight. Plant the canes approximately 35-45cm (14-18in) apart in a single row. Make sure when back-filling with soil that you plant to the same level they were grown in the nursery. You can usually see a soil mark immediately above the top of the fibrous root system. Firm the soil around the roots and when all planted, prune the canes down to a bud as close to ground level as possible. This pruning is the same for both summer and autumn varieties.

The plants soon establish a root system and when the weather warms up, new, healthy shoots will appear above soil level and that's when you feed with a general fertiliser to promote growth.



Do it now

- Feed spring cabbages with a little nitro-chalk, sprinkled around the plants and work it in with a hoe. This will give them a boost in growth when the weather warms up.

- Prune down autumn fruiting raspberries to ground level and tidy along the row and remove any weeds.

- Carry on pruning apple trees while they are still dormant. Don't worry if it's cold, they will be fine and come to no harm.

- In mild areas you could sow broad beans directly into the garden, or if you prefer you could start the plants off in cell trays of compost. Once sown, they can be stood in a cold frame or greenhouse to germinate.

- Feed around the base of established fruit trees such as apples, pleas, plums and damsons with a few handfuls of sulphate of potash. This helps with fruit development through the summer.

IN THE GREENHOUSE

START SHALLOTS INTO GROWTH

The great thing about growing in a greenhouse or polytunnel is being able to extend the growing season and to start plants into early growth. Polytunnels are usually unheated, but on sunny days they can soon warm up, and hold a little heat over night. A great piece of kit to have is a sand bench heated with a soil warming cable. This provides a gentle base heat that is perfect for starting plants into growth or germinating seeds. In early February you can start shallots into growth on the bench. The bulbs are potted into cell trays using multipurpose compost, stood on the bench and kept moist. They soon start into growth and in March they will be planted into the garden to grow on.

WHAT TO DO IN FEBRUARY

1. Sow salad leaves and lettuces into plug trays every few weeks for a continuous supply.
2. Continue preparing the soil borders for summer crops by adding plenty of well-rotted organic matter.
3. As strawberry plants growing in pots start into growth, gradually increase their water and give a liquid feed.
4. Sow broad beans in early February, either directly into the tunnel border or in cell trays. A dwarf variety that's ideal for the polytunnel is 'Robin Hood'.
5. Start sowing veg such as early carrots and spring onions into the borders and cover with fleece.
6. To prepare seed potatoes for planting out into the garden, chit them in trays in the greenhouse or tunnel.

SOW TOMATO AND PEPPER SEEDS

Tomatoes and peppers are ideal for growing under cover where they really benefit from the protected environment and additional heat. One of the great things about growing your own, apart from the wonderful taste, is being able to choose the varieties that you like. Both peppers and tomatoes need constant warmth day and night to germinate, and a heated propagator where you can maintain around 18-25C (65-77F) is ideal, although peppers prefer the higher end! Sow in small pots of compost and cover the seeds with a thin layer of sieved compost or vermiculite, followed by watering. Germination should take 7-10 days, although peppers can be a little slower. Once the seedlings are through, you need to maintain warm conditions to grow on.

Tigerella
Eye-catching with great flavour

MARCH

10 MINUTE JOBS

BREAK UP SOIL

On fine, dry days spend a little time on the plot with a fork or cultivator and break down any lumps of soil after digging, to start creating a fine tilth ready for sowing and planting. Don't, however, do this if the soil is wet and sticky!

CHECK CHITTED POTATOES

Check potatoes that are being chitted indoors to make sure they are developing short shoots. If no shoots are growing, it may be too cold, or if they are growing long and lanky, it is usually because the potatoes are in too warm a position.

MONITOR FORCED RHUBARB

If you are forcing rhubarb under a large forcing pot, check it on a weekly basis and as soon as you get some slender, pink stalks, you can start to pull them. When checking, do it as fast as possible to keep the light out.

HOE WEEDS

As the soil gradually starts to warm up, annual weeds will start to grow. On dry, sunny days run the hoe between spring cabbages and other plants in the garden to loosen the soil surface and kill any weed seeds that are starting to germinate.

STEP BY STEP

SOW LEEKS IN PLUG TRAYS

STEP 1: Leeks are a great winter veg for the garden and will crop for many months. The seeds can be sown directly into the garden and transplanted, but you can get much better results starting the seedlings off in cell trays with a plug around 2.5cm (1in) across. Simply fill the tray with multipurpose compost, lightly firm and make a shallow depression with a dibber approximately 1cm (½in) deep.

STEP 2: The black, angular seeds of leeks are just large enough to handle individually. As the germination rate is usually very high, drop a single seed into the hole in each cell. When it comes to varieties, there are lots to choose from, including many F1 hybrids such as 'Sultan' and 'Below Zero'. 'Musselburgh', is an old variety that is very tasty and crops from October to March.

STEP 3: Once sown, either cover the seeds over with compost or vermiculite, which holds in the moisture and aids germination. Water with a fine rose to thoroughly moisten the compost and then stand the tray in a cold greenhouse or polytunnel to germinate, making sure the compost isn't allowed to dry out. Grow the seedlings on until they are ready for the garden in late May or early June.

SOW PEAS

The first garden peas of the season are always worth waiting for and are delicious when popped straight from the pod! Most varieties can be sown from mid-March onwards as the soil gradually warms up, although the round seeded types such as 'Douce Provence' and 'Meteor' are tougher and can be sown in cooler soil conditions. Sow directly into the soil by making a wide drill with a spade a couple of inches deep. The seeds can then be spaced evenly along the flat bottom of the drill and covered over with soil, before lightly firming down. If covered with a cloche, they should soon start to push through.

MULCH ASPARAGUS BEDS

While the asparagus bed is still dormant, it's the ideal time to give it a final clean through in readiness for the new spears that appear in late April. Carefully remove any weeds along the rows, taking care not to disturb the shallow roots or new shoots that are only a few inches below the surface. When weed free, apply a good thick mulch of garden compost, well-rotted manure or old mushroom compost over the bed. Ideally, it should be around 5cm (2in) deep or a little more. This will help to seal in moisture through the growing season, keep the soil in good, fertile condition and smother any new weeds.

SOW NOW

Onions, lettuce, salad leaves, broad beans, peas, carrots, parsnips, summer cabbage, radishes, leeks, spring onions, bulb onions, spinach.

PLANT NOW

Onion sets, garlic, rhubarb, Jerusalem artichokes, shallots, asparagus, early potatoes.

HARVEST

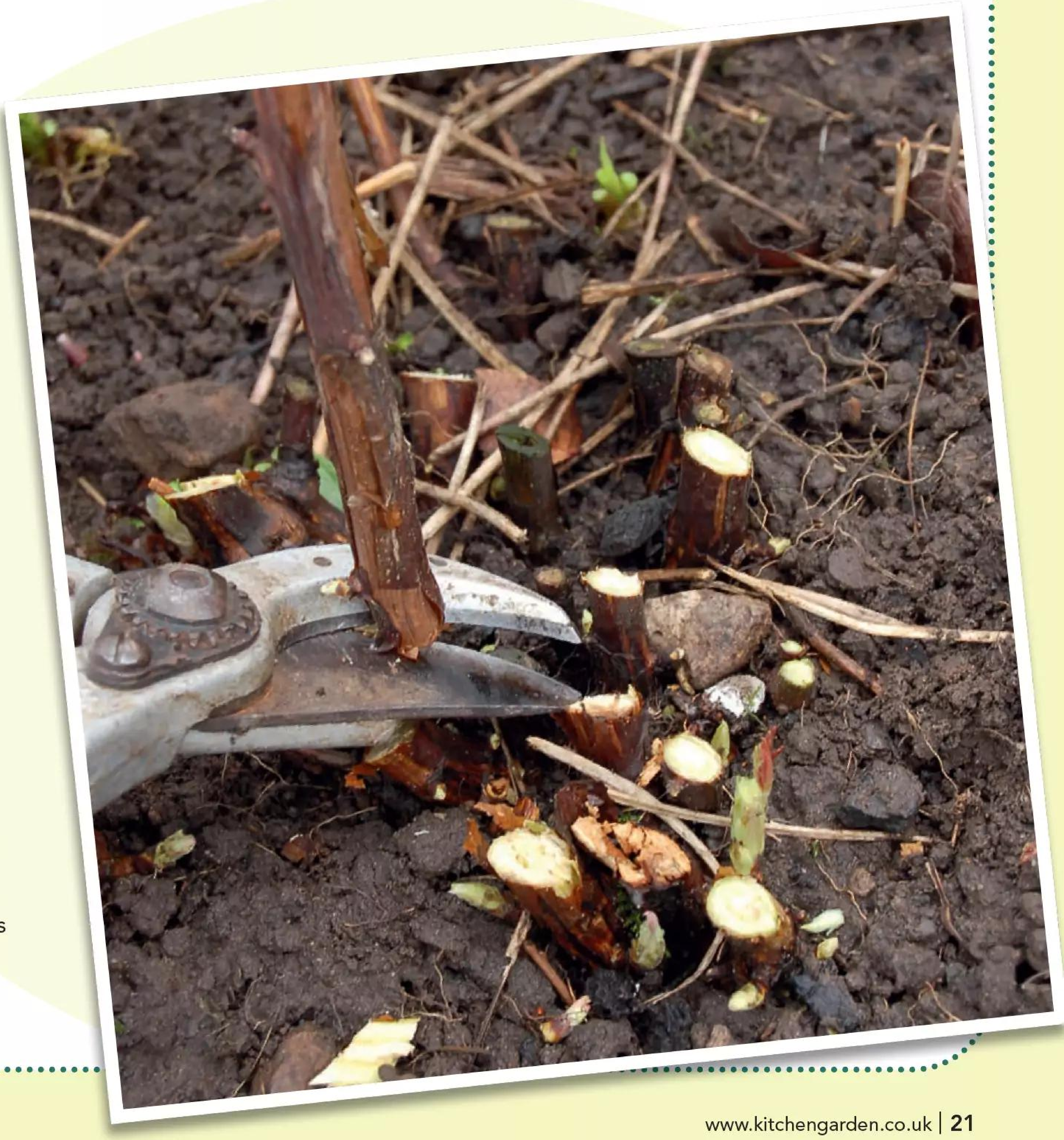
Kale, winter cabbage, leeks, celeriac, Swiss chard, swede, Jerusalem artichokes, spinach, parsnips, cauliflower.

POT PERENNIAL HERBS

Perennial herbs such as thyme, mint, chives, rosemary and sage grow very well in pots, especially when stood in a sunny spot. Young herb plants that are showing signs of new growth can be potted into larger pots to grow on for summer use. If you intend to keep the plant in pots for a few years, pot in a mix of half and half multipurpose and John Innes compost.

PRUNE AUTUMN RASPBERRIES

Late February or early March is the time to prune autumn fruiting raspberries, ideally just before they start into growth for the season. The pruning method is really simple and basically consists of cutting all the canes down to ground level. Don't be tempted to leave several inches of old cane as this can encourage die-back and fungal diseases, so when pruning cut as close to ground level as possible. After pruning, weed along the row and if you have some garden compost give the plants a mulch. In a few weeks' time new shoots will start to grow from below ground level and when they are a few inches tall, feed along the row with some general fertiliser such as Growmore or blood, fish and bone to encourage strong growth. The new canes will grow through the summer and produce flowers and fruit this autumn.



GROWING FIGS

A freshly picked, ripe fig from the garden is absolutely wonderful and bears no resemblance at all to shop bought fruits. The seedless flesh is very sweet and melts in your mouth. Because of the cooler climate in the UK, figs grown here tend to only crop once a year, but they are still worth growing for the fruit which is a real late summer treat.

Figs are hardy to around 15C (59F), but the embryo fruits that develop in the tips of the shoots are killed by a few degrees of frost, which delays fruiting the following year. Some varieties of fig are more suited to our weather and the most reliable and hardy type is 'Brown Turkey' which produces brown/purple fruits when ripe with dark red flesh. 'Brunswick' and 'White Marseilles' are also suitable for growing outside, but for any fig to grow and fruit well, it needs to be planted in a warm, sheltered position.

Figs can be grown two ways, as a free-standing bush or fan trained against a wall or fence. Bushes lend themselves to being grown in large containers and the advantage of growing this way is you can move the plants around in summer into a sunny spot and in winter they can be brought undercover. This helps to protect the embryo fruits from heavy frosts.

Fan trained plants should be grown against a south or west facing wall where they can take advantage of the warm sun.

Pruning is usually done twice a year. In summer the new shoots are shortened to keep the growth compact and to encourage side shoots and embryo fruits to develop for the following year.

In early spring a second prune can be given to further shorten long growths and also to thin out woody stems. On fans, stems growing away from the wall can be shortened and some of the old stems cut back to the base to encourage new replacement stems. This encourages plenty of fruiting shoots and prevents the base of the fan becoming bare

Do iT now

- Sow brassica seeds such as summer cabbages and calabrese into plug trays of compost to produce strong seedlings for planting out in May. Germinate in a cold frame or cold greenhouse.

- In mild areas you can plant early varieties of potatoes, but where it is cooler it's best to wait a while longer. If you live in northern parts of the country you may need to delay planting until the first week in April.

- As Brussels sprouts and kale come to an end, pass the woody stems through a shredder before adding them to the compost heap.

- Shallots are tough can be planted directly into the garden now. Space the bulbs around 15cm (6in) apart and when planted the tip of the bulbs should be just visible.

- Finish planting bare root fruit bushes as soon as possible and after planting prune back the stems hard to aid establishment and encourage plenty of new growth through the summer.

IN THE GREENHOUSE

PRICK OUT TOMATO, PEPPER AND AUBERGINE SEEDLINGS

To be able to pick your own tomatoes, peppers and aubergines as early in the summer as possible, seed needs sowing early. This means having a heated propagator to be able to germinate the seed and warm growing conditions to grow on the seedlings. February sown seed will now have germinated and the seedlings need to be pricked out before they get too large.

The ideal time to prick out is the two-leaf stage. Carefully loosen the roots and handle the seedlings with their seed leaves, not the stem. Transplant individually into small pots of compost, water in and grow on in a light warm greenhouse or conservatory where you can maintain a temperature of 10C (50F) at night.

WHAT TO DO IN MARCH

1 Tender vegetables such as courgettes, sweetcorn and dwarf French beans can be sown now in cell trays. With just a little gentle heat they will soon germinate.

2 As the soil warms up weeds will start to grow, so hand weed or hoe them off regularly to prevent them establishing.

3 Indoor peaches and nectarines can be pollinated by gently dabbing the open flowers with a soft paint brush to move pollen from flower to flower.

4 Carry on sowing tomato seeds in small pots to produce plants for planting out in a cold greenhouse or polytunnel in May.

5 As soon as the first potatoes in the polytunnel push through, earth them up with soil when the growth is several inches tall.

SOW IN THE POLYTUNNEL BORDER

In March the daytime temperatures on sunny days can be warm in a polytunnel, although at night they drop and can be cold. Despite this, the soil will now be warming up which means you can start to sow a good selection of vegetables directly into the prepared soil. Carrots, radish, beetroot, spring onions, peas and turnips can be sown. After raking the soil to produce a fine seed bed, take out shallow drills around 1.5-2cm (½-¾in) deep and sow the seeds thinly along the row. Cover over with moist soil and lightly firm the soil. To settle the soil water lightly and cover over the ground with a sheet of fleece until the seedlings start to push through.

APRIL

10 MINUTE JOBS

PLANT OUT BROAD BEANS

Broad bean plants raised in cell trays and sown in late winter can be planted out into the garden where they will soon settle in and make new growth. Plant out in single or double rows and keep watered in dry weather to help the new roots grow and establish.

THIN OUT LEEK SEEDLINGS

Leek seed that was sown last month in plug trays should now have germinated and the seedlings making good growth. Where there's more than one seedling per cell, carefully thin them out to a single plant, leaving the strongest one to grow on and establish.

APPLY FERTILISER

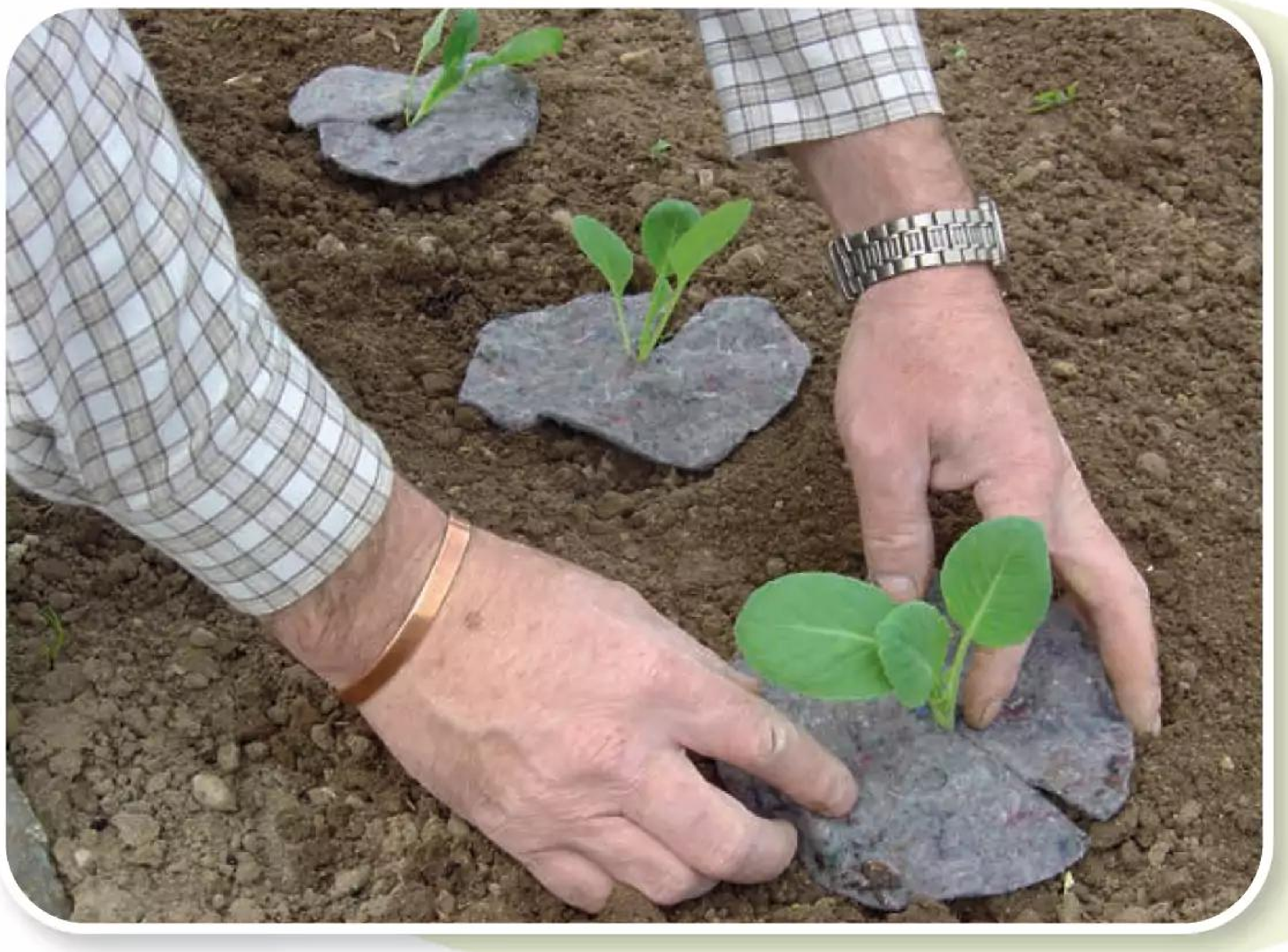
April is when many vegetables are sown or planted into the plots. To give them a good start apply a general fertiliser such as Growmore, blood, fish and bone or pelleted poultry pellets, sprinkled over the area and lightly raked in 7-10 days before sowing or planting.

CHECK FOR 'BIG BUD'

Check blackcurrant bushes for signs of 'big bud' which is spread by a gall mite. Infected buds are easy to recognise and are large and round instead of slim and pointed. The mites spread reversion virus, so if large buds are spotted pick them off and burn.

PLANT SUMMER CABBAGES

STEP 1: Young plants of summer cabbages can be planted into the garden now to grow on. If you haven't grown your own from seed, there is still time, or very often you can buy plants from nurseries or garden centres. Plant out in ground that has been fertilised and firmed, spacing the plants approximately 30-45cm (12-18in) apart, depending on the type you are growing. Firm the roots and water to help settle the plants.



STEP 2: If cabbage root fly is a problem in your garden, it pays to protect the new plants straight away by fitting a collar around the base of the plant. This acts as a physical barrier and prevents the flies from laying eggs on the soil at the base of the stem. You can buy collars, or cut out circles 10-12.5cm (4-5in) in diameter from cardboard, felt matting or thick polythene.

STEP 3: Pigeons can also be a serious pest and if the plants are not protected, they will soon be pecked and destroyed. A low frame of chicken wire over the plants will keep the birds off until they are established. Once the plants start to grow and push up the wire, remove it and replace straight away with insect-proof mesh that will protect the plants from cabbage white butterflies over summer.

PLANT EARLY POTATOES

For the majority of the UK, April is the main month for planting first early potatoes, although in very mild areas, planting can start in March.

There's no point trying to fight nature and plant too early in cold soil as the tubers will simply sit there until soil temperatures rise. Ideally, the tubers will have been chitted and are showing healthy, short growths, which will give them a head start when planted. The ground should be well prepared by forking it through and working in some well-rotted compost or manure to retain moisture. Plant the chitted tubers around 10-15cm (4-6in) deep and space them around 40-45cm (16-18in) apart in the rows.

SOW WINTER BRASSICAS IN TRAYS

Now is the perfect time to start sowing seeds of all the winter brassicas such as Brussels sprouts, kale, purple sprouting broccoli and winter cabbages. The aim is to have young plants to plant in the garden in early summer. This gives the brassicas a long growing season to establish before the weather turns cooler in autumn. A very convenient way to raise the seedlings is to sow the seeds into cell trays. This way you can easily control exactly how many plants you want and there is no root disturbance when you plant out in the garden. Sow a single seed per cell and germinate in a cold frame or cold greenhouse.

SOW NOW

Onions, lettuce, salad leaves, broad beans, peas, Brussels sprouts, kale, broccoli, autumn and winter cabbage, Savoy, carrots, parsnips, radish, leeks, spring onions, spinach, turnips, beetroot, chard. (Under cover sow: dwarf French beans, sweetcorn, marrows, courgettes).

PLANT NOW

Onion sets, shallots, rhubarb, Jerusalem artichokes, asparagus, early potatoes, cabbage, lettuce, strawberries.

HARVEST

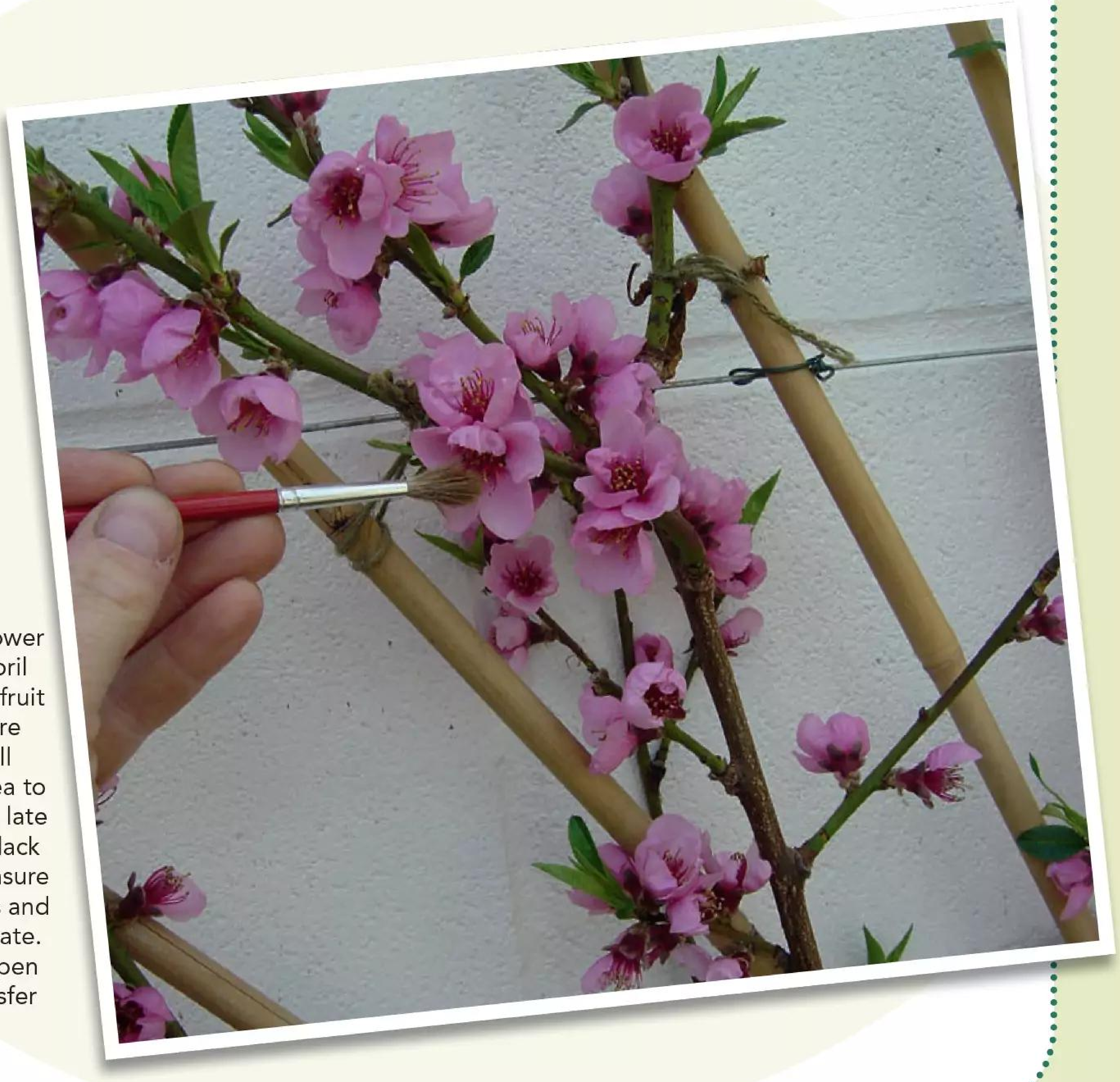
Kale, leeks, spring greens, forced rhubarb.

TIE IN SOFT FRUIT STEMS

Blackberries, loganberries, tayberries and all the other hybrid berries make long vigorous growth through the summer. It's the long stems that grew last summer that will flower and fruit this year. If not already done, the old, fruited stems need cutting back to ground level, and the new stems for this year should be tied to wires to space them apart and to help keep them under control.

PROTECT & POLLINATE EARLY BLOSSOM

Peaches and apricots blossom early in the growing season, and some types of plums and pears also flower early, making them susceptible to frost damage. April can be a cold month, with northerly winds and any fruit blossom will need protecting on frosty nights. Where the trees are trained against a wall or fence they will get some protection, but to be sure, it's a good idea to cover them over with a couple of layers of fleece in late afternoon when a frost is forecast. Cold winds and lack of bees and insects can also be a problem, so to ensure a good fruit set on very early fruits such as peaches and apricots use a small, soft paint brush to hand-pollinate. Do this on a sunny day when the flowers are fully open by gently dabbing the centre of the flowers to transfer pollen from one flower to another.



FORCE RHUBARB

Established clumps of rhubarb that were covered over with a forcing pot or old dustbin back in January or February, should be starting to provide tender sticks of pink rhubarb. Forcing is a really easy way to get an early crop and to extend the growing season. Forced clumps are normally at least two or three weeks ahead of the outside crop and the forced sticks have a delicious, delicate flavour. By the time you've finished pulling the last of the forced rhubarb, the outdoor, unforced clumps will be ready to start on.

In theory, any variety of rhubarb can be forced into early growth by excluding light, although for an early crop it is best to choose early varieties such as 'Timperley Early', 'Champagne' and 'Grandad's Favourite'. These naturally start into growth earlier in the season than a late variety such as 'Victoria', but late crops started into growth under a forcing pot will still produce lovely forced stalks.

The secret with harvesting forced rhubarb is to do it little and often and to cover over the clump again as quickly as possible. It only takes a few minutes of light to affect growth and for the very pale pink sticks to start developing more colour.

Once the stalks have all been pulled (never cut rhubarb as the short stumps can rot into the crown), allow the clump to carry on growing through the summer months without any more stalks being pulled. This gives the clump time to recover and helps it start to build up its reserves again. Ideally, a clump shouldn't be forced for two years on the run as it does have a weakening effect. If you intend to force rhubarb every spring you really need two or better still three clumps so that you can force them in rotation.

Rhubarb is a greedy plant and in spring it will benefit greatly from a feed of general fertiliser sprinkled around the base of the plants. This applies to all clumps, forced or growing naturally in the garden.

Do it now

- Check lettuce and other salads growing under cloches and in warm weather lift the covers and water the plants.
- Sow beetroot in shallow drills. Most types of beetroot contain several seeds in a cluster, so when sowing, sow as thinly as possible to prevent over-crowding.
- Onion sets can be planted out into well prepared ground. Plant the sets approximately 10-15cm (4-6in) apart so that the tip of the small bulb is just visible over soil level.
- It's still too cold to sow courgettes and marrows outside into the garden, but the seeds can be started off in cell trays in a cold greenhouse or polytunnel, as long as it's frost free.
- Apply a mulch of well-rotted manure or garden compost around the bases of soft fruit bushes such as blackcurrants and gooseberries. This will seal in moisture and reduce weed growth.

IN THE GREENHOUSE

PLANTING & POTTING TOMATO PLANTS

Mid to late April is when we start to plant tomatoes in a polytunnel or cold greenhouse. The exact time will depend on where you live and what the weather is like. If the plants have been hardened-off from the warm greenhouse, they will withstand cool nights, but not frost. If the forecast looks fine and the plants are showing their first truss of flowers, it's time to plant. They can either be planted directly into the soil border, spaced 45-60cm (18-24in) apart, or they can be potted into large pots – 10-12 litre – to grow on. The advantage of pots is you can start them off in the warmth of the greenhouse and then move them to the polytunnel as the weather warms up.

WHAT TO DO IN APRIL

1 Vegetables raised from seed in a frost-free greenhouse can be moved to the polytunnel to grow on, once the seedlings are strong and established.

2 Thin rows of seedlings of spring onions, beetroot and carrots growing in the borders when they are large enough to handle.

3 Parsley can sometimes be tricky to germinate outside, so sow the seeds in cell trays, keep the compost moist and stand the trays in the greenhouse. This way they germinate much faster than in the garden.

4 There is still time to buy plug plants of many vegetables that can be potted and grown on in the greenhouse.

5 Continue to prick out tomato and pepper seedlings into small pots of compost and grow them on in a warm greenhouse.

SOW CUCUMBER SEEDS IN WARMTH

To grow well and produce plenty of fruits, cucumbers need warm growing conditions. If started too early when temperatures are low, seed won't germinate and plants will often collapse and die due to temperature fluctuations.

If you intend to grow your cucumbers in a cold greenhouse or polytunnel, mid to late-April is the ideal time to sow seeds to produce strong plants for planting out from mid-May onwards. To germinate, the seeds need a temperature of 20-25C (68-77F). Sow the seeds individually in small pots of compost, water and stand the pots in the propagator where they should start to push through in four or five days. Once germinated, grow on in a warm, light position and keep the compost moist, but not wet.

Mr.Fothergill's

MAY

10 MINUTE JOBS

EARTH UP POTATOES

Early varieties of potatoes planted last month should be growing well now and making new shoots. To encourage side shoots and more tubers earth them up by pulling soil up around the plants to form ridges. Ideally, do this little and often as the stems develop.

CHECK RHUBARB STEMS

Rhubarb will be in full growth now and making plenty of sticks for pulling. However, a spell of dry or hot weather can cause the plants to form thick flowering stems from the centre of the clump. These should be pulled out as soon as they develop.

COVER CARROTS

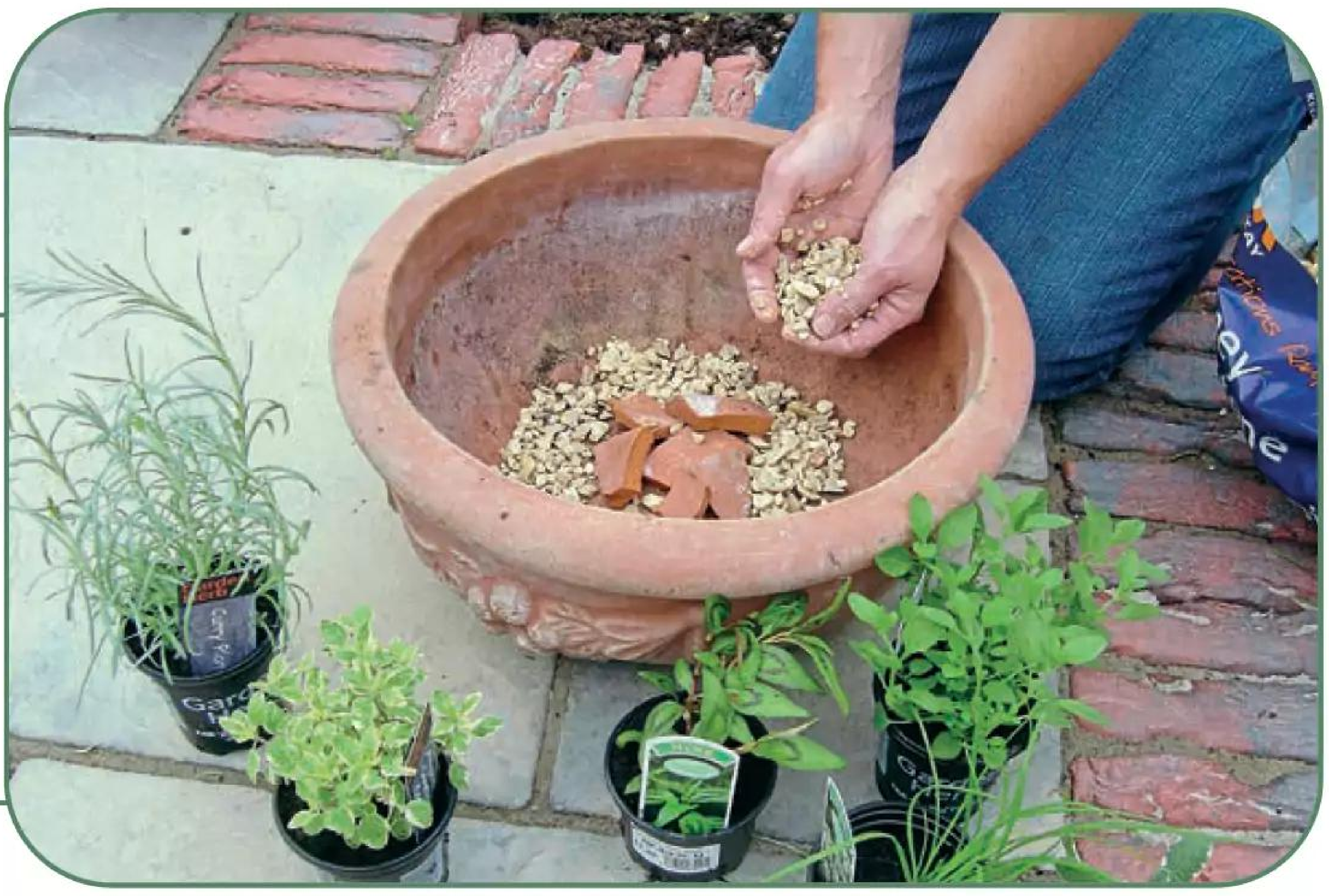
The major pest of carrots is carrot root fly which is attracted by the scent of the carrot foliage. To protect the carrots from damage caused by the burrowing grubs, keep the plants covered over at all times with fleece or fine insect-proof mesh pegged down at the edges.

KEEP SOIL MOIST

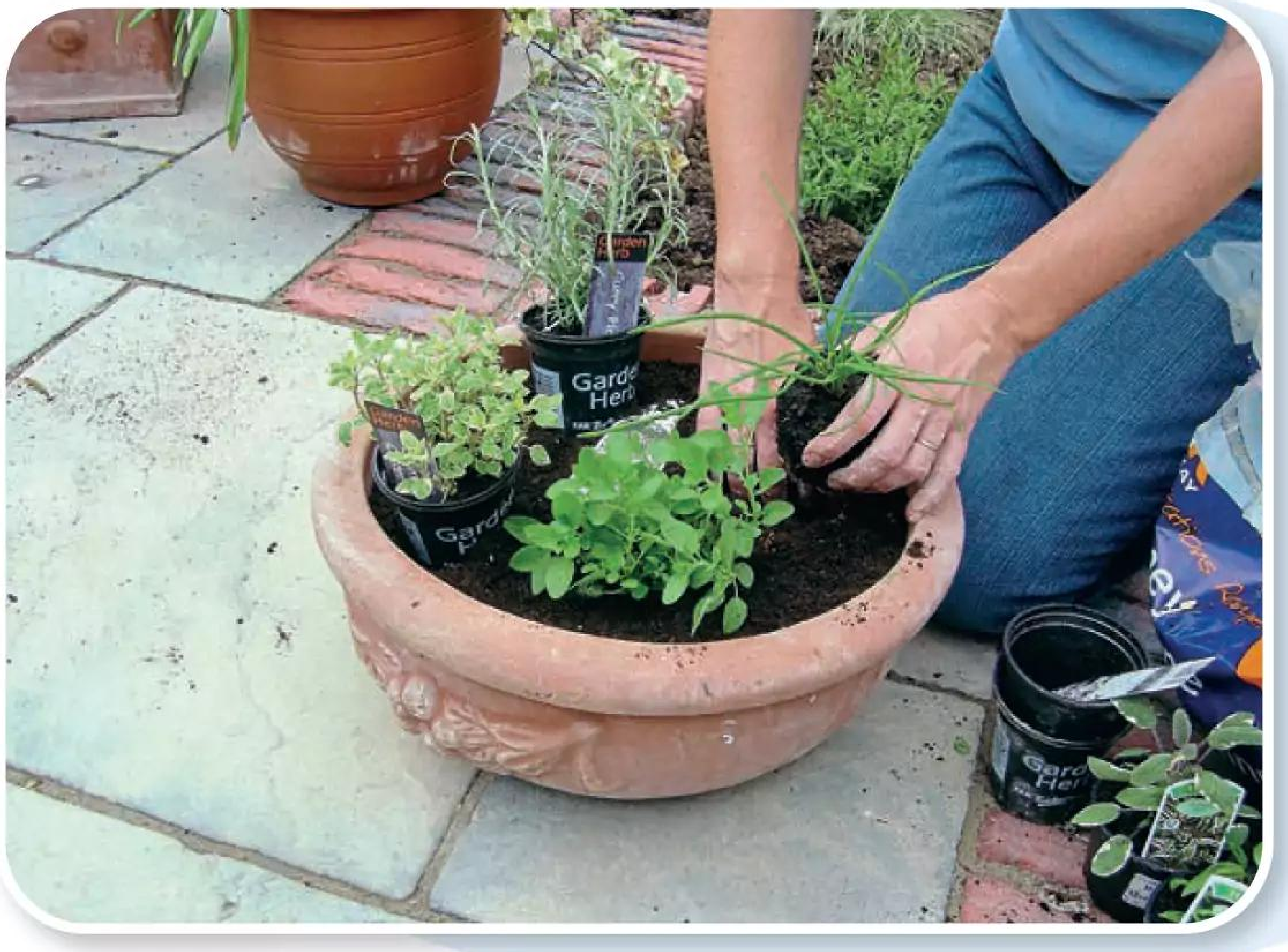
In dry weather newly sown seeds may struggle to germinate in the soil. After sowing vegetable seeds directly into the garden, keep an eye on the plot and if the soil starts to dry out below the surface, water the area gently to moisten the soil.

STEP BY STEP

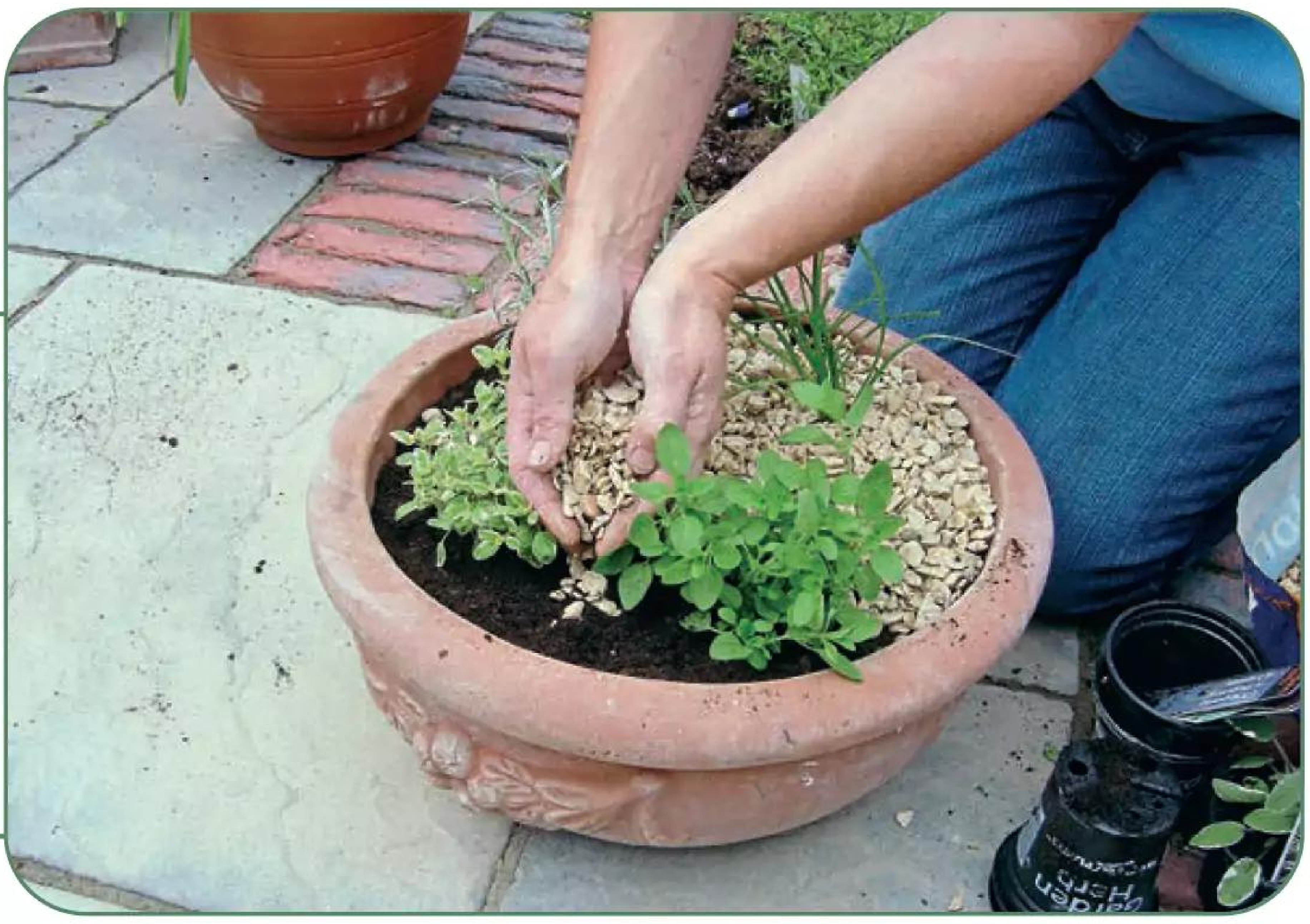
PLANT A HERB POT



STEP 1: A herb pot is a great way to grow a selection of popular herbs for use in recipes and summer dishes. Most herbs like a sunny position and will grow happily in a container. Drainage is important as they hate to have their roots in wet compost, so before planting, place some crocks over the drainage holes and a layer of gravel to make sure the compost drains freely.



STEP 2: Use well-drained compost such as half and half John Innes no. 2 and multipurpose. You can also add a little extra grit if you feel it needs it. Fill the container with compost and plant a selection of plants. Choose herbs that you are going to use and bear in mind their shape and how large they will grow as you want the finished container to be balanced.



STEP 3: Finish off with a dressing of fine gravel. This helps with surface drainage around the plants and also gives a decorative finish to the pot. Water the plants in and stand the pot in a sunny position. Although many herbs come from the Mediterranean region, when grown in containers they need to be watered on a regular basis to encourage fresh growth.

PLANT GLOBE ARTICHOKES

If you have room on the veg plot and fancy growing something a little different, have a go with globe artichokes. It's a large plant with attractive, silvery foliage and when mature it produces thistle-like flower heads on tall stalks. In good growing conditions the plants can grow to around 1m (3ft) tall and wide. The edible part of the plant is the flower, or rather the scaly sepals, which are eaten when cooked. They are an acquired taste, but even if you don't eat them, the plants look great in the garden and when the flowers open they attract bees and insects. Planted now, it will be established ready to overwinter.

PLANT OUT SWEETCORN

Sweetcorn plants grown from seed a month ago can be planted out into the garden when the weather is suitable. This is usually from around the middle of the month, but it really depends on the temperatures and what part of the country you live in. In the North it tends to be towards the end of the month, but in the south it can be a few weeks earlier. The advantage of growing this way, rather than sowing directly into the soil, is it gives the plants a longer growing season. When planting, choose a sunny position and grow in blocks to aid wind pollination.

SOW NOW

Dwarf beans, runner beans, onions, lettuce, salad leaves, peas, autumn broccoli, kale, cauliflower, kohl rabi, carrots, parsnips, radish, spring onions, spinach, turnips, beetroot, chard, parsley, annual herbs, marrow, pumpkin, squash, courgettes, Florence fennel, corn salad, salsify, radish, salad onions and sweetcorn.

PLANT NOW

Potatoes, asparagus, Brussels sprouts, winter cabbage, kale, sprouting broccoli, leeks, runner beans, lettuce, dwarf beans, courgettes and perennial herbs.

HARVEST

Sprouting broccoli, kale, spring greens, rhubarb, lettuce, radish, spring onions, leeks, chard, baby carrots.

REJUVENATE HUNGRY RHUBARB

Rhubarb is a hungry plant and needs a moisture retentive, fertile soil to grow well and produce a good crop of sticks for pulling though the summer. If the soil is poor and the plants are not fed, growth can be weak and pale. To perk up hungry rhubarb that isn't as vigorous and healthy as it should be, feed around the clump with a general fertiliser and give the roots a good watering.

PLANT NEW FRUIT BUSHES

If you want to plant some new fruit bushes in your garden or on the allotment, but didn't get around to planting bare-root plants in the dormant season, May is a good time to plant container grown plants. Planting now while the soil is warming up gives the plants the rest of the summer to make a good root system and plenty of top growth.

Ground preparation before planting is very important, especially when you consider that the bushes are going to be in the ground for up to 15 years. All perennial weeds need removing thoroughly and plenty of organic matter in the form of garden compost or well rotted manure should be worked into the area to improve the soil structure. After planting, water the ground around the roots and through the summer check the plants and if the soil dries out, give it an occasional soaking.

CARE FOR APPLES

We're in apple blossom time now, although the exact time of blossoming will depend partly on where you live in the country and the variety of apple being grown. Some varieties blossom early and others a little later, so if you are growing several apples in your garden it's important that you have trees in flower at the same time to ensure pollination. Some of the ornamental crab apples such as Malus 'John Downie' make excellent pollinators as they flower over a long period.

Apple varieties that flower early, usually in April, can be prone to frost damage, so if possible protect the blossom when it is open on nights when a frost is forecast by draping a sheet of fleece over the tree or branches. The fleece needs to be removed in the day though to allow bees and other pollinating insects access to the flowers. If blossom is caught on a frosty night, to try and reduce the damage, wash the frost off early the following morning with water, before the sun gets to it.

Around mid to late May is also the time to hang pheromone traps in apple trees to help control codling moths as they start to become active and lay eggs on developing fruitlets. The traps work by catching the male moths and although you won't get total control, the damage to the fruits by the caterpillars will be greatly reduced.

Apple powdery mildew can also start to show on the tips of new growth in late May, especially if we get a warm, dry spell of weather. Pruning in winter to thin over-crowded stems will improve air circulation and mulching around the base of the tree to retain moisture in the soil will help. If it does appear, cut off badly affected shoots and feed and water the tree to reduce stress. Alternatively, spray with a surfactant such as SB Plant Invigorator or Resolver Natural Power Bug & Mildew Control, which will also help against pests such as aphids.

Do it now

- When parsnip seedlings are an inch or two tall, thin them out to a single plant per station if you sowed several seeds together, or thin the row so that the seedlings are around 10-15cm (4-6in) apart.
- In mild areas plant out runner bean and dwarf bean plants, but have some fleece handy just in case they need some protection. Where frost is still likely wait until the end of the month to plant.
- Check around the garden for early signs of pests such as aphids on seedlings and slug and snail damage on plants. To prevent the damage getting worse, control any pests as soon as you spot them.
- Check rows of onions to make sure all the sets are growing and if any have been pulled out by birds, firm them back in.
- Plant out Brussels sprout plants as soon as they are large enough to give them a long growing season.

IN THE GREENHOUSE

POT PEPPERS INTO FINAL POTS

Chilli peppers and sweet peppers that are growing in small pots can be transplanted into their final pots anytime now or when the flower buds start to develop at the top of the plant. Although they can be grown in the border, they can grow to be very large, you could grow them in pots around 30cm (12in) across, which keeps them bushy and compact. Multipurpose compost is fine and after potting water the compost to settle the roots. Stand the pots in good light and keep the compost moist, but not wet, to encourage the roots to grow out into the new compost. When the first flowers open, start feeding once a week with a tomato fertiliser.

WHAT TO DO IN MAY

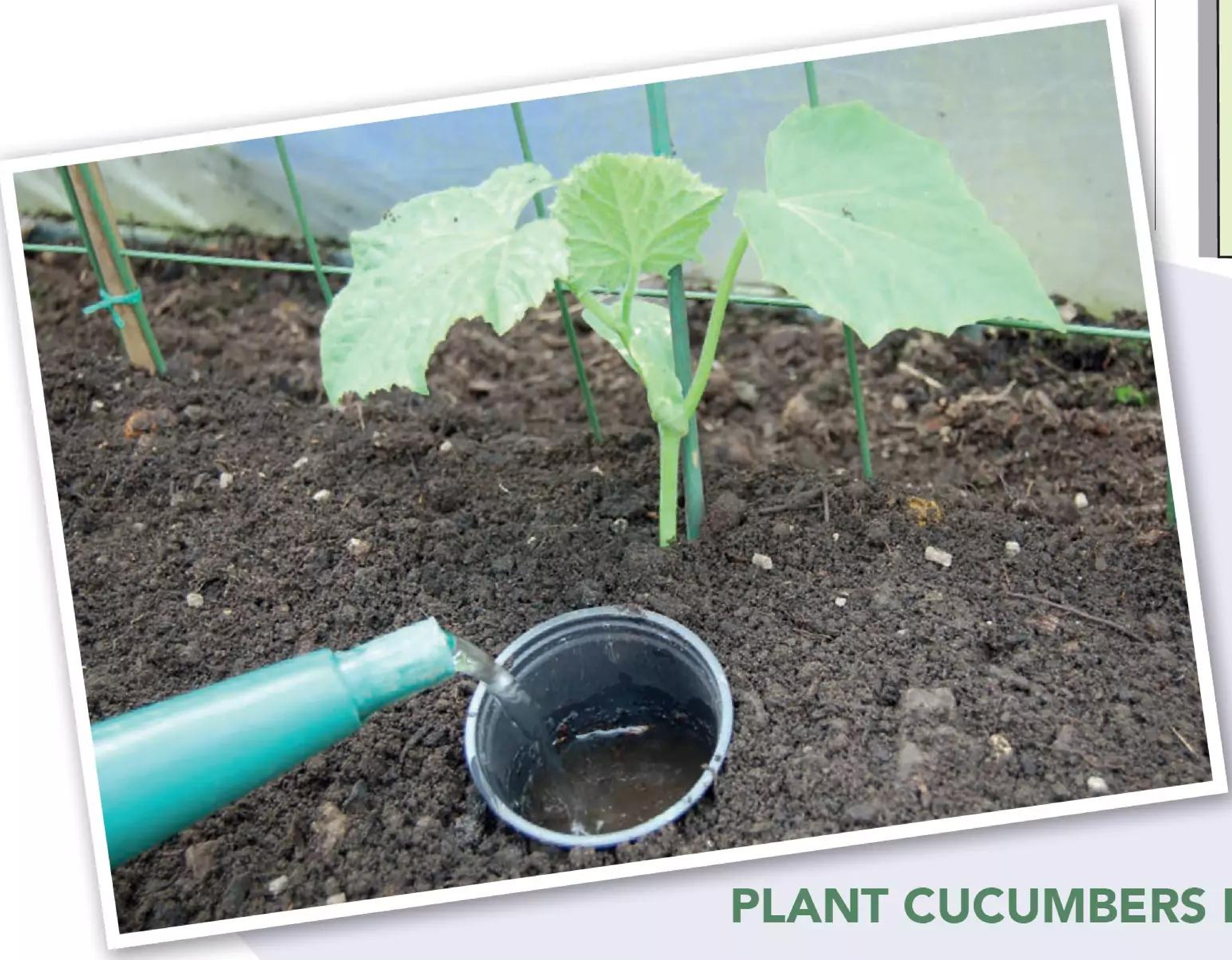
1 As tomato plants start to make strong growth, tie the main stem at regular intervals to a cane for support and pinch-out small side shoots growing in the leaf joints.

2 Sow curly kale seed in plug trays to produce young plants for growing on in the polytunnel to provide you with fresh greens in late summer.

3 Harden off veg plants such as beans, courgettes and sweetcorn that are destined for the garden.

4 Coriander is prone to running to seed very quickly, so sow in pots every few weeks to give you a steady supply through the summer.

5 Thin rows of carrots, beetroot and spring onion seedlings to allow the remaining plants room to grow. The thinnings can be added to salads.



PLANT CUCUMBERS IN WARMTH

To grow and establish cucumbers need warmth, day and night. They hate fluctuating temperatures and if the night temperature drops dramatically, the plants often collapse, especially if the soil around the base of the stem is wet! With that in mind, don't plant cucumbers until the weather is settled and warming up. If growing in a border, prepare the soil by mixing in some compost and plant on a slight mound to prevent water standing at the base of the stem. A small pot buried by the side of the plant allows you to get water to the roots, while keeping the soil on the surface dry. Alternatively, grow in large pots, but still create a mound to plant on.

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JUNE

10 MINUTE JOBS

TRIM YOUNG FRUIT TREES

Check young fruit trees that are being grown as standards or half-standards and trim off any new shoots growing from the main trunk, flush back to the trunk. If left to grow all summer, they spoil the shape of the tree and use valuable energy.

WATER NEWLY PLANTED VEG

Keep an eye on newly planted vegetables to make sure that they are settling in and establishing. If the weather is warm and dry, water the soil around the roots to prevent the plants from drying out. This is best done early morning or in the evening.

PINCH OUT BROAD BEANS

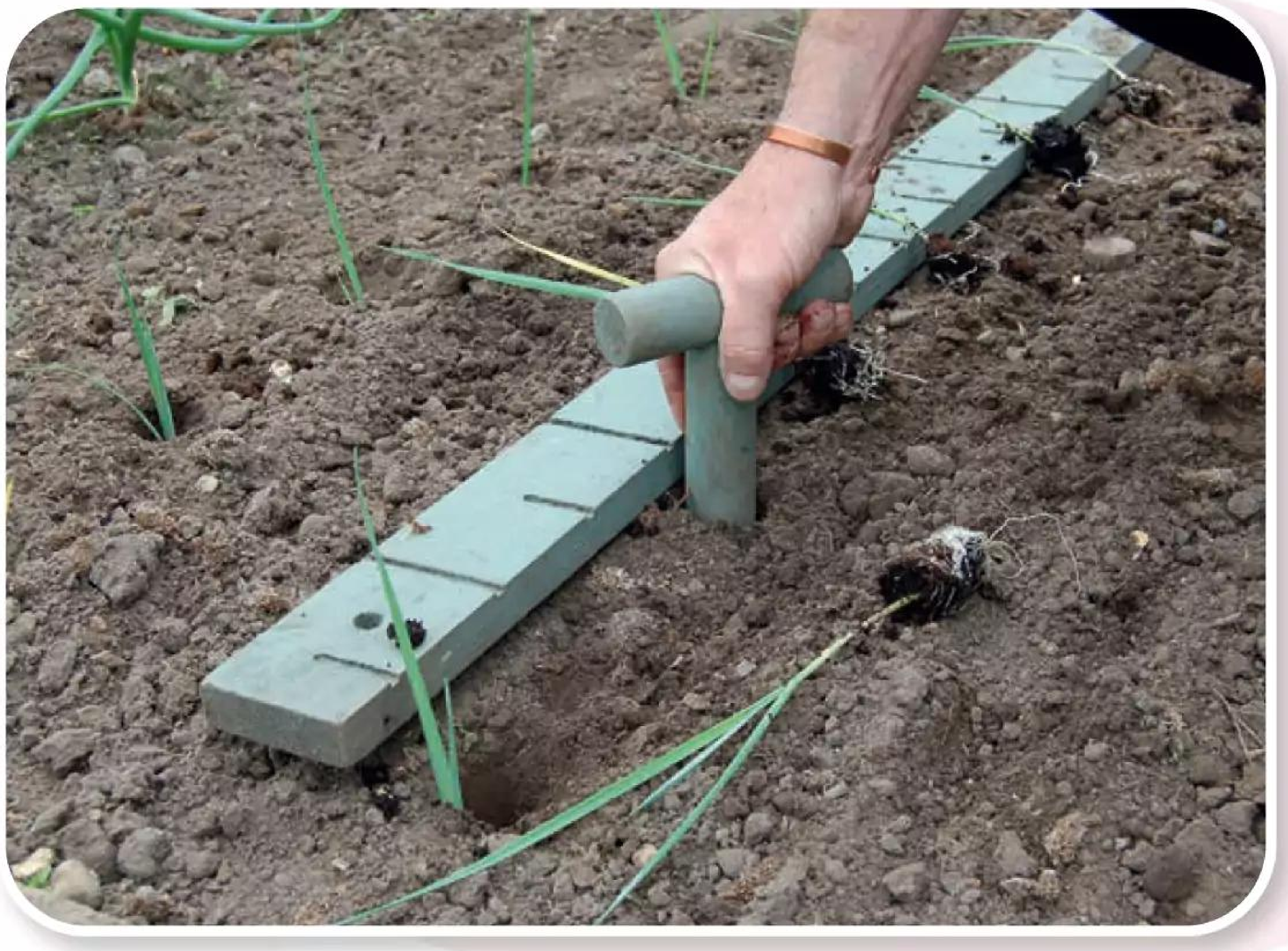
When broad beans are in full flower pinch out the top few inches of the growing tip. This diverts the plant's energy into pods of beans and it also helps to deter black bean aphids. The leafy tips are very tasty eaten raw or lightly steamed.

WATCH OUT FOR PESTS

Keep an eye open when you are working in the garden for plant pests and if spotted deal with them straight away before the problem gets too serious. Look out for bird damage on early fruit, slugs and snails on salad crops and gooseberry sawfly grubs.

PLANT LEEKS

STEP 1: Leeks are a great winter vegetable and they can be harvested from the garden from October through until April or even May. The seed was sown back in mid-March in plug trays with gentle heat to aid germination. Once the seedlings were an inch or two high and had been thinned to a single leek plant per cell, they were grown cold in the polytunnel to grow into strong seedlings.



STEP 2: Having raised the seedlings in plug trays, use the traditional method of planting in holes to blanch the base of the leek and form a white shaft. Fork the soil over well in advance and feed with a general fertiliser. Using a dibber, make holes approx. 15cm (6in) deep, 23cm (9in) apart and place a plant into each hole so that roughly two-thirds is below the soil.

STEP 3: Once planted, carefully fill each hole with water using a watering can. The water slowly seeps down and washes loose soil around the plug of roots. This thorough soaking will settle in the seedlings, but if the weather is dry it may need repeating a few days later to help the roots establish and grow out into the surrounding soil. Don't however over-water, especially in clay soils.

PLANT SELF-BLANCHING CELERY

Celery is one of those plants that can either grow very well and produce a good crop of stalks, or it can struggle. Much depends on the soil you are growing it in and in order for it to establish and grow well you need a fertile, well-drained soil with plenty of organic matter. It also needs growing fast without any checks in growth. Self-blanching varieties are ideal to grow as they don't need blanching and young plants need planting out as soon as the danger of frost has passed. Plant in blocks so the plants help to blanch each other and keep the soil moist at all times through the summer.

FILL GAPS WITH SALAD CROPS

At the start of the season when the plot is empty it always looks as though there is plenty of growing room, but the ground very quickly fills up once you start sowing and planting out. Before you know it you're struggling for space, so take advantage of every little bit of soil and fill small gaps and corners between other vegetables with fast growing salad crops and lettuce. Empty ground needs weeding, so you might as well plant all available space with plants and by planting small blocks of lettuce and salads around the plot, you will have a continuous supply of fresh salads for several months.

SOW NOW

Dwarf beans, runner beans, peas, beetroot, lettuce, salad leaves, land cress, sprouting broccoli, kale, kohl rabi, carrots, basil, coriander, radish, spring onions, spinach, turnips, chard, parsley, annual herbs, courgettes, Florence fennel, corn salad.

PLANT NOW

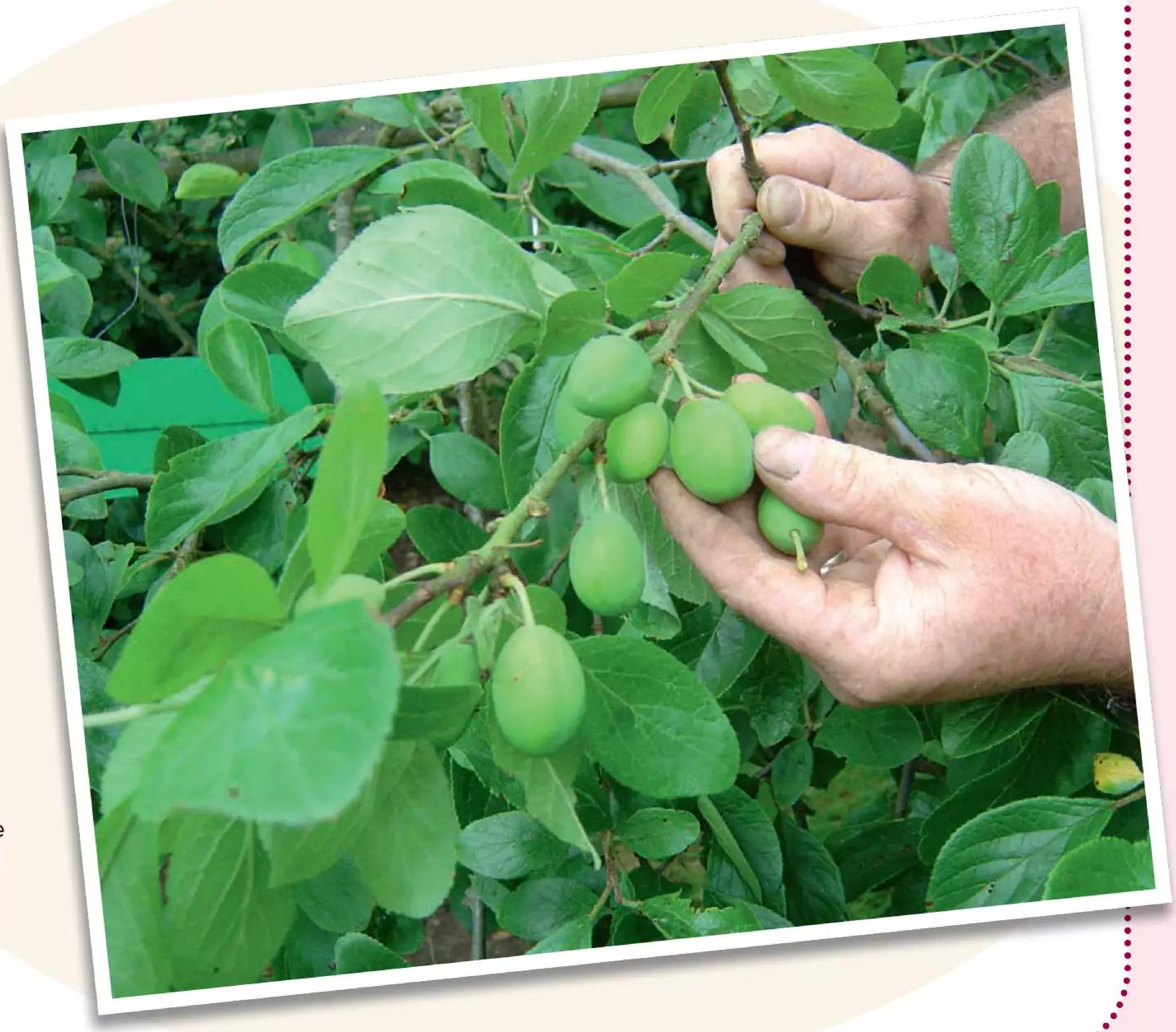
Brussels sprouts, winter cabbage, kale, sprouting broccoli, calabrese, leeks, runner beans, lettuce, dwarf beans, courgettes, marrow, squashes, tomatoes, celery, potatoes, sweetcorn, herbs.

HARVEST

Late broccoli, spring cabbage, rhubarb, lettuce, radish, spring onions, chard, early carrots, turnips.

HARVEST STRAWBERRIES

June is the start of the strawberry season and the first ripe berries of the summer are always very welcome. Pick the berries every few days as they ripen and if birds are a problem, make sure you net the plants over. For plants being grown in containers, keep them watered on a regular basis to maintain moist compost, and liquid feed once a week with a high potash fertiliser.



THIN PLUMS

Plum trees can be erratic when it comes to fruiting. When a tree carries a heavy crop one year, it can often result in a small crop the following year. To prevent this happening, fruits should be thinned by simply removing some of the small fruits to a single fruit per cluster. This means the existing fruits will grow larger and reduce the risk of branches being broken by the weight of the fruit.

GROW FRUIT IN CONTAINERS

Where garden space is limited it is possible to grow a good range of fruit in containers to produce delicious fresh produce and decorative plants. Lots of different fruits are fine in containers, in fact some plants will often grow better this way, especially if they need specific soil conditions, such as blueberries that need acid soil.

Choosing the right container is important to make sure the plants grow well. Plastic, wood, terracotta or resin pots are all perfectly fine as long as they have adequate drainage in the bottom to prevent the compost from getting waterlogged. Whatever type or style of pot you go for, it needs to be large enough to support the plant and keep it healthy, allowing it to keep growing for several years. Having said that, ideally it is best to start the plant in a smaller pot and pot it up into larger pots over the next few years until it reaches the final pot size. Potting a small plant into a huge pot of compost doesn't work very well, so it really does pay to pot up over a few years.

The choice of compost is also important. Multipurpose compost is not suitable for long-term growing as it runs out of nutrients and the structure breaks down after a year. A loam-based compost is ideal and you could mix three parts John Innes no.3 with one-part multipurpose compost to give a mix that isn't too heavy but will keep its structure and retain moisture and nutrients. If plants need acidic conditions, use an ericaceous mix. Even with a good compost mix, you will need to feed regularly. In spring a slow release fertiliser mixed into the surface perks up the compost and through the summer you can give liquid feeds when you water.

As for what to grow, the sky's the limit! Blueberries, gooseberries, redcurrants, blackcurrants, raspberries and strawberries are great in pots. You can even grow top fruit such as apples, pears, peaches, cherries, apricots and figs. Enjoy!

Do iT now

- Check fast growing mangetout on a regular basis and pick the flat pods while they are still young and tender. Regular picking also encourages more flowers and pods.

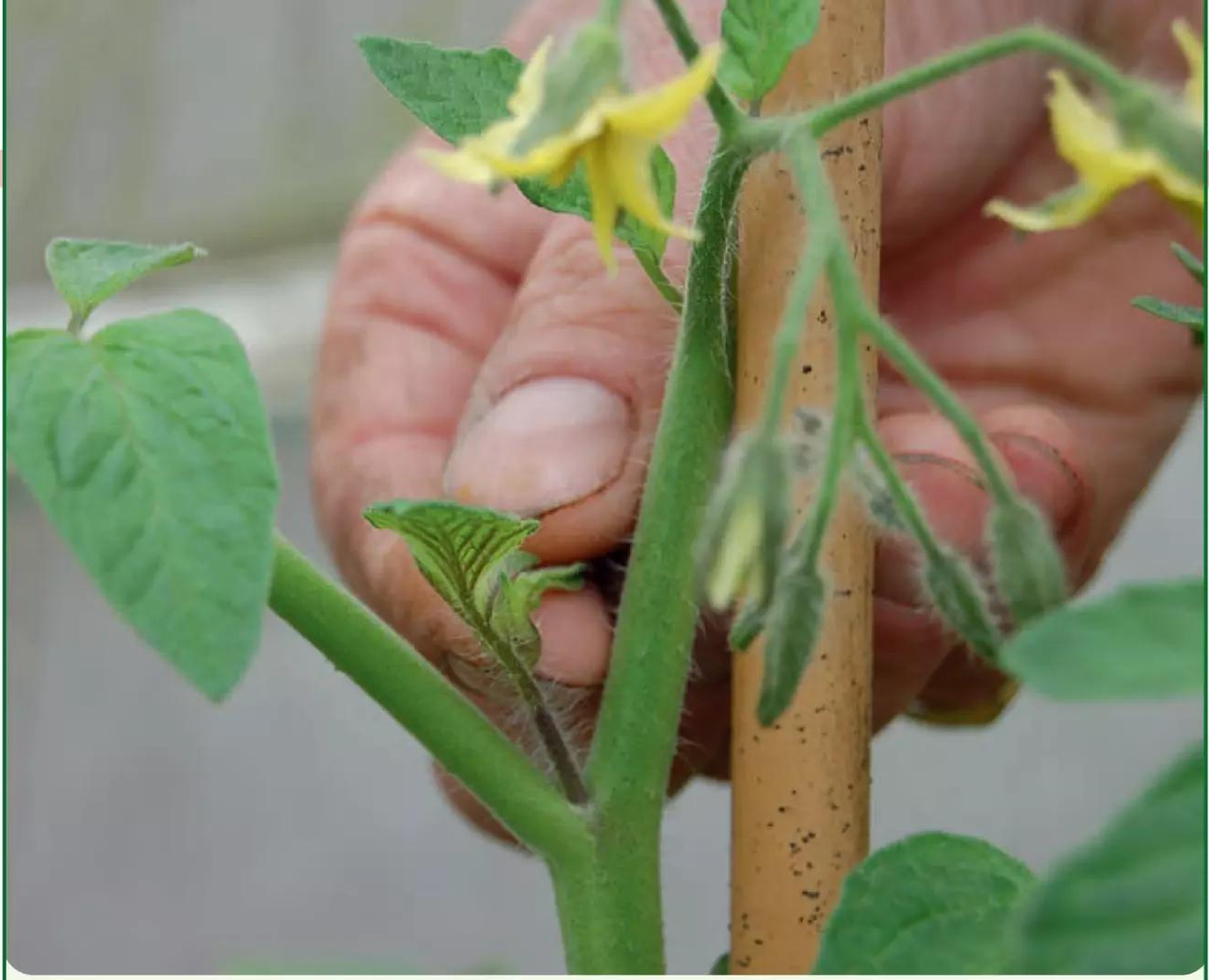
- To protect all brassicas from caterpillar damage, it's important to cover them over with insect proof netting before the cabbage white butterflies become active, making sure the net is pegged down.

- There is still time to sow tender vegetables such as courgettes, French beans and runner beans to produce fresh, tender produce from late summer.

- June is a good growing month for vegetables and also for weeds. Keep on top of annual weeds by running a Dutch hoe between plants and rows of veg on a weekly basis to keep the soil weed free.

- Onions make strong growth at this time of the year, which is important for bulb formation later in the summer. To promote strong growth feed with a balanced fertiliser and water in dry.

Mangetout pea
'Norli'



IN THE GREENHOUSE

REMOVE SIDE SHOOTS AND TIE IN TOMATOES

Tomato plants should now be growing well in the greenhouse or polytunnel and it's during June when the days are at their longest that they put on a spurt of growth. Tall growing varieties need supporting at regular intervals to be able to support the weight of tomatoes that will develop over the summer and the way to do it is to tie the stems to stout canes with soft string.

It's also important to remove the side shoots that grow in the leaf joints, otherwise instead of a single stemmed plant you will get a large bushy plant. Ideally, check plants a couple of times a week and pinch out the side shoots while still small and soft.

WHAT TO DO IN JUNE

1 Make sure you ventilate on sunny days to help prevent the temperatures under cover from getting too hot.

2 As soon as annual herb plants such as basil are established, they can be planted out or potted into larger containers to grow on.

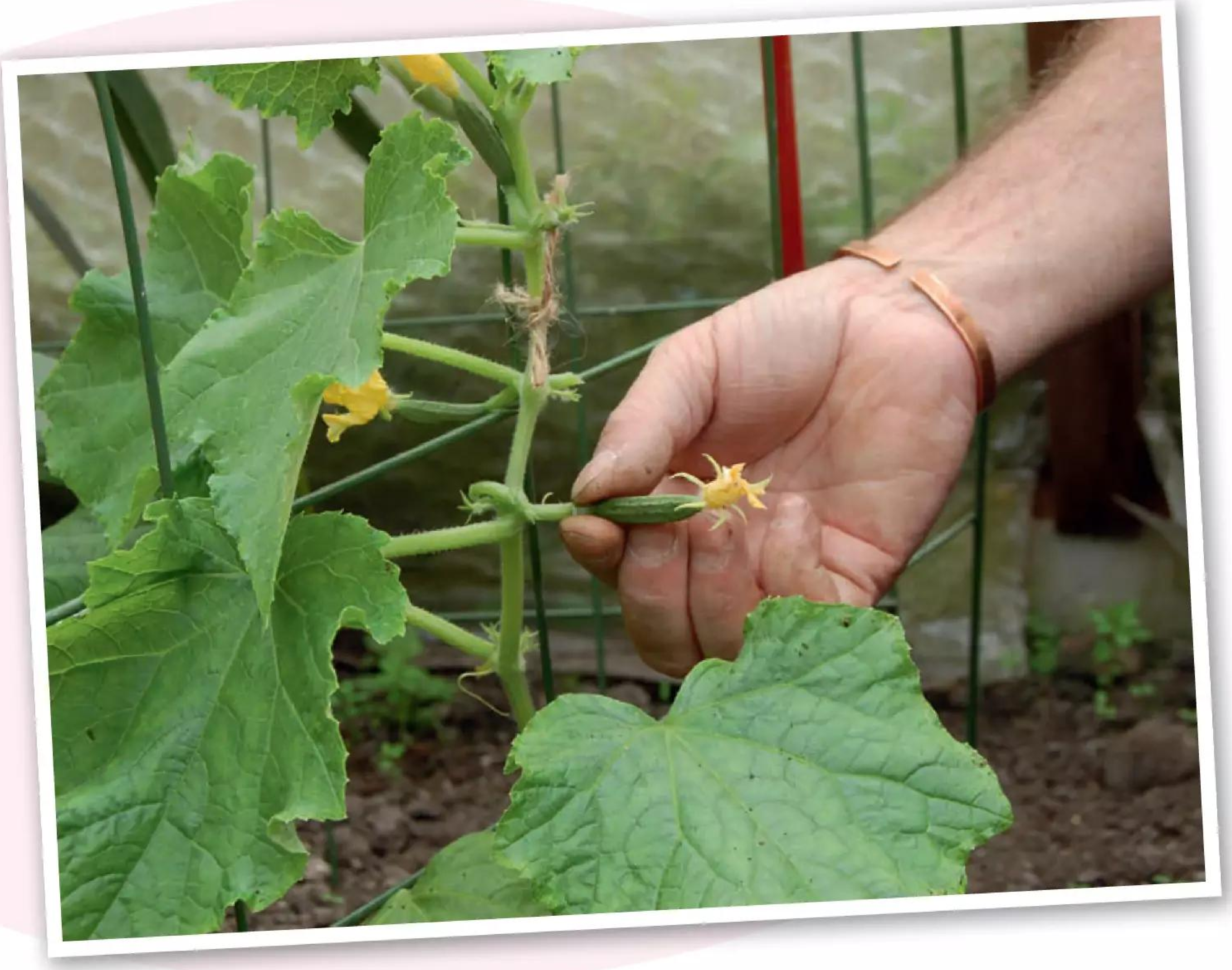
3 To help tomato fruits develop and ripen later in the summer, feed weekly with a high potash tomato fertiliser.

4 Continue to sow lettuce and other salad leaves to give a continued supply right through the summer.

5 Make sure that strawberries growing in pots and hanging baskets are kept well-watered and fed with a high potash feed to keep the fruits ripening through June.

REMOVE THE FIRST CUCUMBERS

Once established and growing in a warm environment, cucumbers will produce a good crop of fruits over the summer months. To grow well they need plenty of warmth, moisture and nutrients. The first cucumber of the season is always welcome, but before we allow a young plant to start fruiting, it's essential that the plant establishes properly. A tip that commercial growers do is to pick off the small embryo fruits on young plants up to the height of 45-60cm (18-24in). This allows the plants to make a good root system and plenty of leaf growth, rather than using all their energy on producing cucumbers. The result is a stronger plant that produces more fruit over a longer period.



JULY

10 MINUTE JOBS

FEED ONIONS

Give onions a feed with a fertiliser rich in nitrogen to keep them actively growing through July, which is when the bulbs really start to swell and fill out. In dry weather keep the plants watered to prevent any checks in growth, which can cause them to bolt.

PICK YOUNG COURGETTES

Check courgettes in the garden which should be growing well now and producing plenty of fruits. To keep them fruiting all summer long, pick the courgettes while they are small and tender. If allowed to grow large into marrows, the plant will stop producing new flowers and fruit.

CHECK LEEKS

Check young leek plants to make sure that they are establishing and starting to make new growth. If you planted in deep holes made with a dibber, it's worth occasionally filling the holes with water to make sure the roots have plenty of moisture around them.

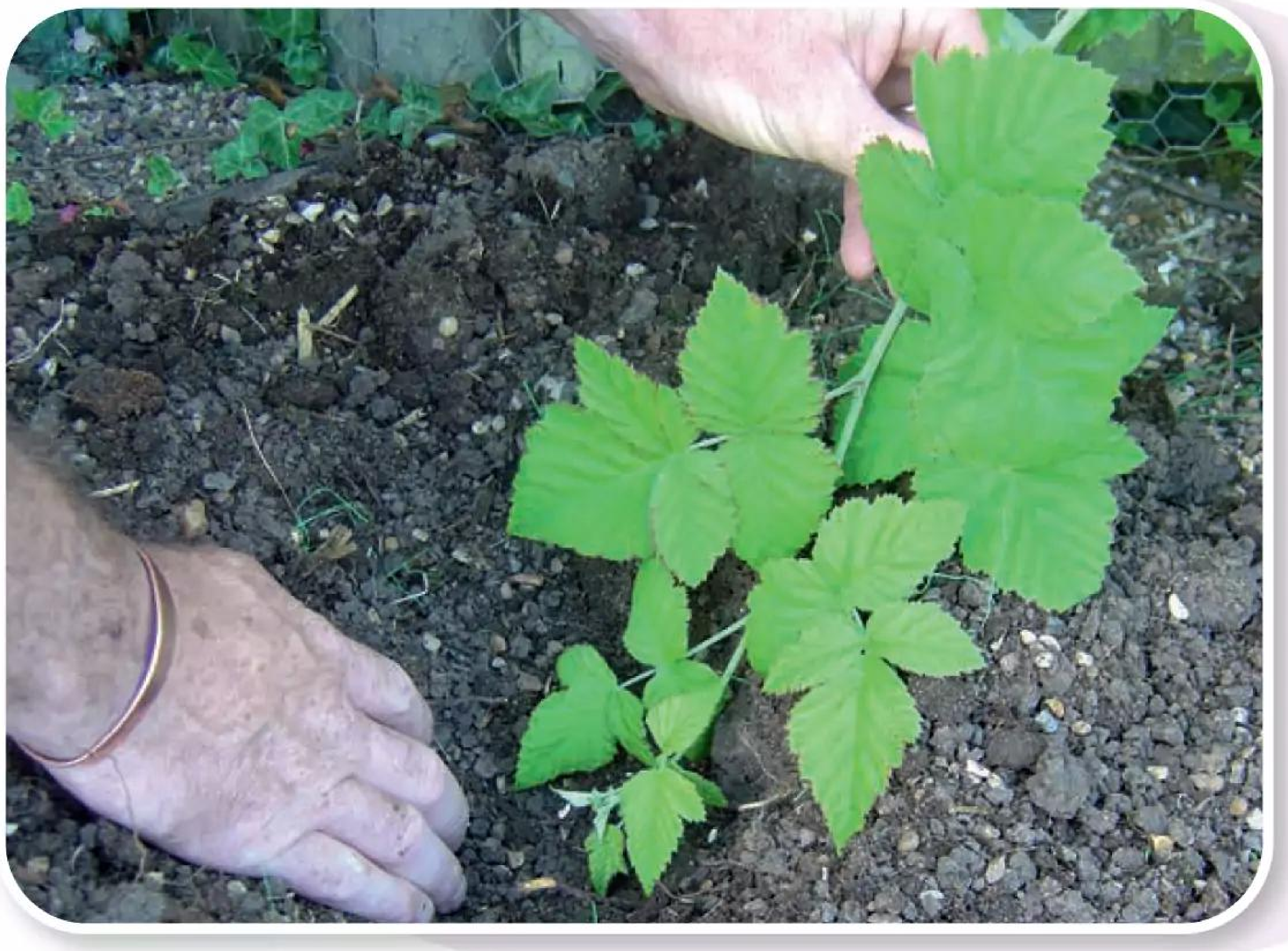
WATCH OUT FOR BLIGHT

Keep an eye out for any signs of blight on potato foliage, especially if the weather has been warm and humid for a few days. Tell-tale signs are watery rots on the leaves that soon spread and turn brown, followed by brown patches on the stems.

STEP BY STEP

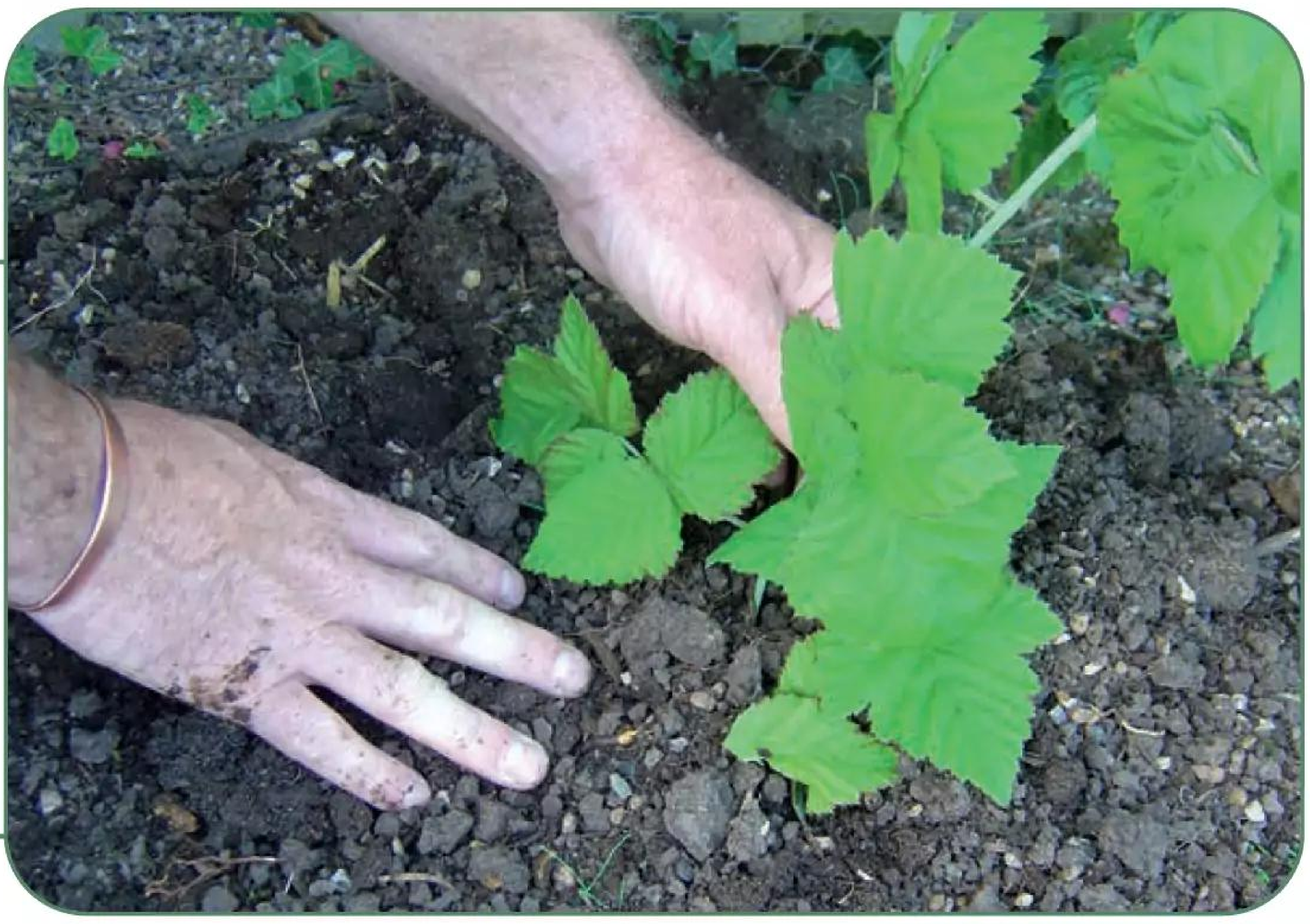
PROPAGATE BLACKBERRIES AND HYBRID BERRIES

STEP 1: Blackberries and hybrid berries that produce long new growth at this time of the year can easily be propagated by tip-layering. This is exactly how wild blackberries spread naturally to form a thicket of growth. In a garden situation it's very simple to do to produce new plants. Start by preparing an area of ground around the base of the plant by digging it over and mixing in some compost.



STEP 2: Bend one of the new shoots down to soil level and where it reaches to, scoop out a shallow depression just a couple of inches deep. Place the tip of the blackberry, loganberry, tayberry or any other hybrid berry into the hole. You can if you wish at this stage peg the tip down with some bent wire to hold it into place, especially if the main stem is strong and springy!

STEP 3: Pull the soil back over the tip so that is it buried in the hole and water to moisten and settle the soil around the shoot. It's then a case of waiting and being patient. Over autumn and winter, roots will develop from the buried tip and next spring a strong new shoot will grow. By autumn it will be established and can be lifted and replanted in its permanent position.



WATER CARROTS IN DRY WEATHER

Carrots are a fairly easy crop to grow in a sandy or light, loamy soil. What they don't like is a heavy clay, very stony ground or recently manured ground. For the best carrots, always sow directly into the soil so that the tap root can grow straight down without being damaged. What is important is to make sure the soil around the developing roots remains moist through the summer. If the soil dries out, followed by rain, it can cause the roots to split. To prevent this from happening, check the soil and if it is starting to dry out, water along the rows to maintain moist conditions around the roots.

TRY SOME DIFFERENT LETTUCE

You only have to look through a seed catalogue to see the large choice of different lettuce such as cos, butterhead, iceberg and the leafy, cut and come again types. Some are modern varieties that were initially bred for commercial growing, but there are still lots of old varieties available, many from the Victorian and Edwardian era. For something a little different, why not grow a few old varieties such as 'Marvel of Four Seasons', 'Bloody Cos' or 'Fat Lazy Blonde' – named because the heads are fat and the inside leaves are pale! Sow a few seeds every few weeks and you'll be able to enjoy them through until autumn.

SOW NOW

Dwarf beans, peas (early varieties), beetroot, lettuce, salad leaves, land cress, kohl rabi, carrots, basil, coriander, radish, spring onions, spinach, turnips, chard, Florence fennel, corn salad, chicory, Chinese cabbage.

PLANT NOW

Brussels sprouts, winter cabbage, kale, sprouting broccoli, calabrese, leeks, runner beans, lettuce, dwarf beans, courgettes, marrow, squashes, tomatoes.

HARVEST

Broad beans, dwarf beans, early summer cabbage, rhubarb, lettuce, radish, spring onions, chard, carrots, beetroot, courgettes, turnips, spinach, herbs, globe artichokes, lettuce, gooseberries, blackcurrants, redcurrants, cherries, raspberries, strawberries.

KEEP BLUEBERRIES WATERED AND FED

In July the fruits on blueberries should be developing and swelling nicely and depending on the variety you are growing, they will soon start to ripen. Blueberries naturally come from areas of high rainfall, so in order to get plump, juicy fruits, make sure the plant is watered regularly through the summer to maintain moist compost. A liquid feed with a high potash fertiliser every two weeks will also help the fruits to ripen.

GOOSEBERRY SEASON

July is the start of the gooseberry season and it will often carry on well onto August, with different varieties ripening at different times. Many modern varieties such as 'Invicta' are dual purpose and early in the season the green fruits can be picked for cooking and preserves. If left on the bush the fruits will change colour to a much paler yellow/green and will become much sweeter and can be used as dessert fruits.

GROW FLORENCE FENNEL

If you've had a holiday in the Mediterranean region and eaten in local restaurants, the chances are you been served Florence or bulb fennel. It's an interesting vegetable to grow for its swollen bulb-like base that can be eaten raw in salads, braised as a warm vegetable with cheese or fish dishes or used in soups. It has a mild aniseed flavour and as well as the white fleshy bulb, the ferny foliage can be used to flavour food.

To grow in the UK, Florence fennel needs a warm, sheltered, sunny spot. It likes a well-drained soil, but at the same time it needs plenty of water when growing to prevent it from bolting.

Seed can be sown from mid-spring as long as the soil and air temperatures are warm. It can also be sown in July to produce a crop in early autumn and very often the later sowing does the best because the temperatures are more stable.

When growing the aim is to reduce the risk of growth checks as much as possible, so where possible sow the seed directly into prepared soil. Take out a shallow drill approximately 1.5cm (½in) deep, water along the base of the drill and sow the seed very thinly, before covering over with soil. As for varieties, go for modern ones that have a better resistance to bolting such as 'Amigo', 'Di Firenze' or 'Canton'.

In warm, damp soil seedlings soon appear and when an inch or two tall can be thinned to 10cm (4in) apart. Keep the soil around the plants moist at all times, but don't over-water. In good growing conditions the plants will grow quickly and soon start to swell at the base. At this stage you can pull every other plant and use them in salads, to allow the remaining plants more room to mature.

Traditionally, soil is drawn up around the stem as it swells to blanch it, but even if you don't do that you will still get a perfectly edible and tasty bulb.

Do it now

- Apple trees will often produce more fruit than they can grow to maturity. Some fall naturally in early July, but if lots still remain, thin manually to leave just one or two fruits per cluster.

- First early potatoes planted in late March or early April are ready for lifting now as you need them. Once the tubers have developed, consider cutting back the foliage to prevent a possible blight attack.

- Check strawberries, raspberries and blackcurrants on a regular basis and pick the fruits when they are ripe and at their best.

- As the stalks and foliage (haulms) of main crop potatoes grow, earth them up on a regular basis to firm ridges along the row. This encourages a heavier crop of spuds.

- Pull out old cauliflowers and calabrese plants that have blown (started to go to seed), so you can clear the ground for other crops.

IN THE GREENHOUSE

INCREASE YOUR STRAWBERRY PLANTS

Strawberry plants have a limited life and normally after three or four years they lose vigour and produce less fruits. This is particularly true of plants growing in containers; these should only be kept for three years. Fortunately, they are very easy to propagate from runners that develop after the fruit has been picked. Root runners from plants in their second season, but only from healthy, productive plants. If the plants are weak and have distorted foliage, chances are they have a virus and you shouldn't propagate from them. Simply peg the runners down using short pieces of wire, into cell trays of compost. Kept moist they root quickly and can then be snipped from the parent plant.

WHAT TO DO IN JULY

1 Keep picking cucumbers as they develop, otherwise the plant will stop producing flowers and more fruit.

2 Squash plants can grow very large in a polytunnel so keep them under control by pinching out the tips of the long stems when the fruits start to develop.

3 Feed plants on a regular basis to keep them growing and cropping. A weekly liquid feed is fast acting and provides a steady supply of nutrients.

4 Bring in pots of blueberries under cover as the fruit develops to protect them from the birds.

5 Coriander tends to run to seed quickly, so sow seeds every few weeks for a regular supply of leaves.

HARVEST SUMMER PRODUCE & SOW MORE

As we enter July the polytunnel and greenhouse is starting to get very productive! Crops that we also grow outside are usually ready a month or so earlier when grown undercover, which helps to extend the supply of homegrown fresh vegetables from the garden. Of course, there's still plenty to come with all the wonderful tomatoes, peppers and other tender crops, but for now it's great to harvest fresh summer veg from the tunnel, such as salads, potatoes, onions, beetroot, carrots, beans and much more. We also need to carry on sowing to ensure we get another crop for early autumn.

AUGUST

10 MINUTE JOBS

PICK DWARF FRENCH BEANS

Dwarf French beans should be producing plenty of thin pods at the moment and the secret is to pick little and often. This ensures the beans are young and tender and it also encourages more pods to develop. Ideally, spend a little time picking every few days.

WATER NEW PLANTS

Any newly planted vegetables or fruit bushes in the garden need to be kept watered in dry weather to help the roots establish. Always water the soil around the roots and ideally water in early morning or late evening when the temperatures are much cooler.

SOW LETTUCE

Keep sowing lettuce little and often to keep a supply of fresh salads through late summer and autumn. Sow a small amount of seeds every couple of weeks in plug trays of compost. To help germination, keep the trays moist and in a cool, light place.

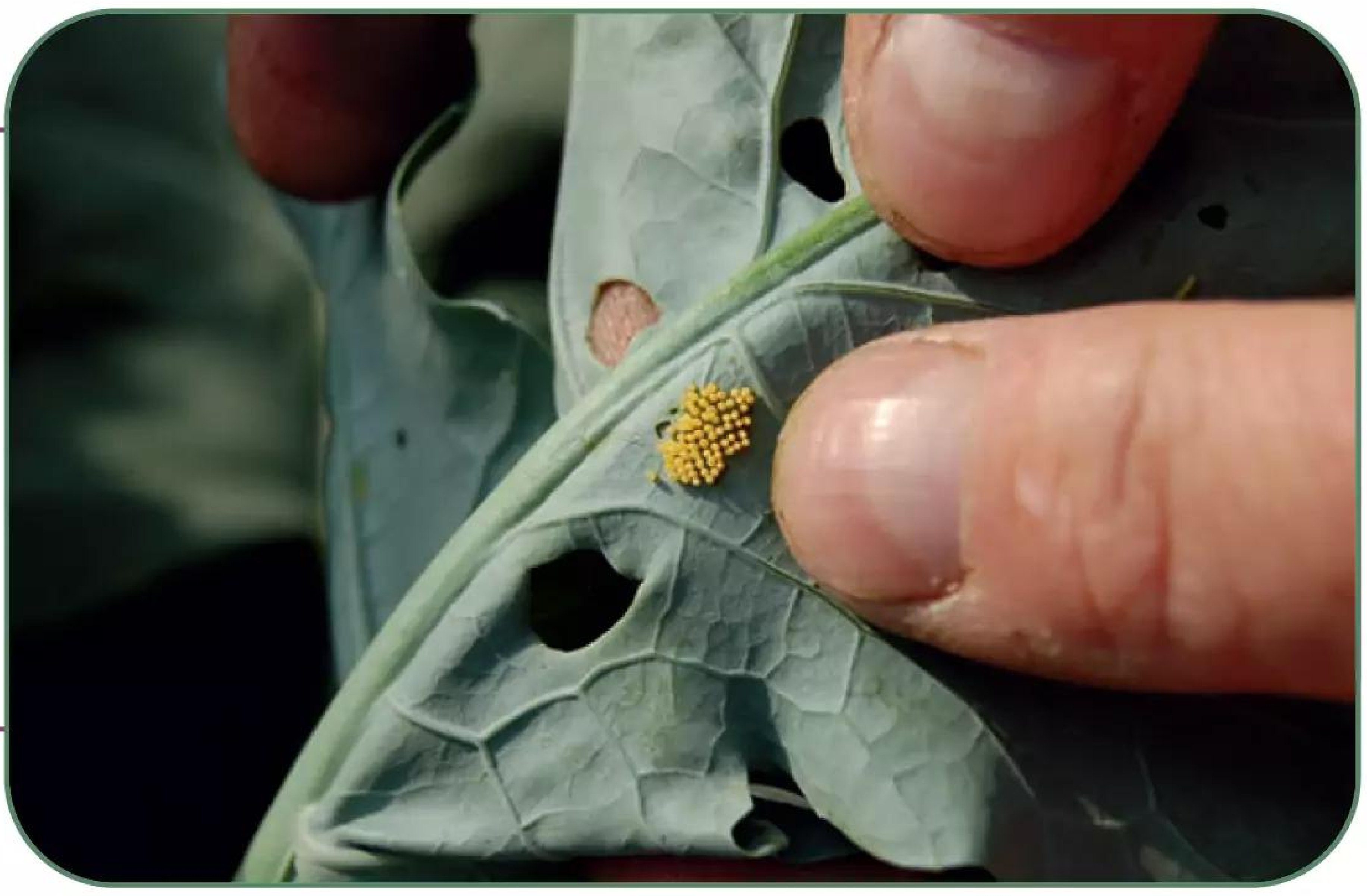
CHECK SWEETCORN

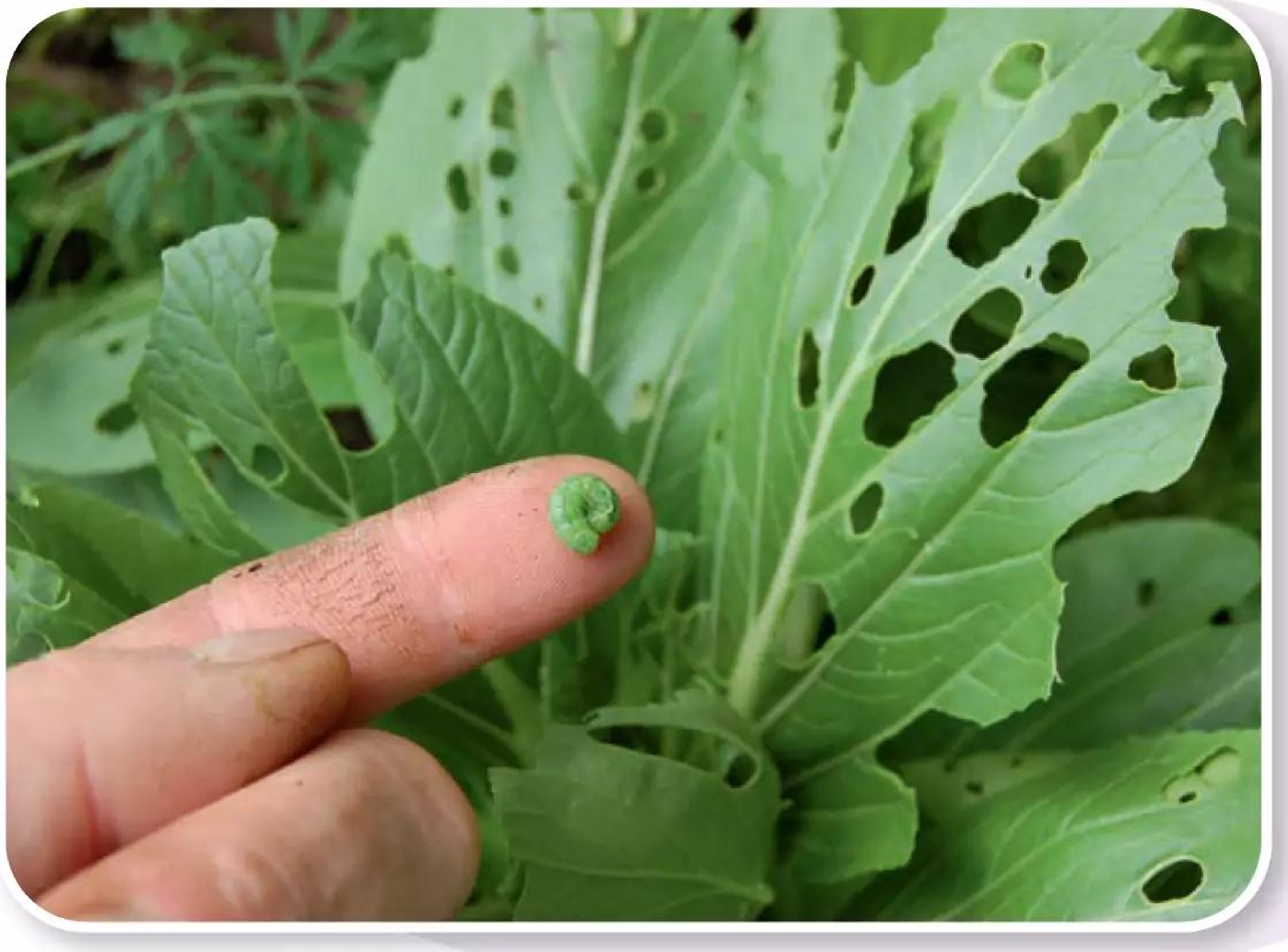
As the cobs of sweetcorn start to swell check for ripening. They will be ready to pull and eat when the flower at the end has turned brown and dry and when the sheath is pulled back the corn will be yellow, fully formed and juicy.

STEP BY STEP

CONTROL CABBAGE CATERPILLARS

STEP 1: A major pest on all brassicas is caterpillars and if not controlled they can ruin the crop. The three culprits that cause the damage are the large white cabbage butterfly, the small white cabbage butterfly and the cabbage moth. If growing your plants in the open, one method of controlling the pest is to check the plants regularly and crush the clumps of eggs on the underside of the leaves.





STEP 2: Although checking and destroying eggs is effective, very often clumps are missed and they soon hatch into tiny, hungry caterpillars that start feeding on the leaves immediately. Of the three types of caterpillars, the green and black ones belong to the large cabbage white butterfly, green to the small cabbage white butterfly and pale green/yellow to the cabbage moth. When checking the plants look for the caterpillars and destroy them.

STEP 3: Of course, spraying with an insecticide is also an option, but if you don't want to spray you can use a natural predator such as Nemasys Biological Fruit & Veg Protection. This is a microscopic nematode that when applied to the brassicas seeks out the caterpillars and infects them with deadly bacteria. The packs of nematodes are mixed with water and sprayed on the foliage when caterpillars are around.

LET ONION TOPS BEND NATURALLY

There is often debate as to whether you should bend down onion leaves at the end of the season to help the bulbs ripen. Various gardeners have their opinion on the matter but bulbs generally store better if the leaves are allowed to grow and stand as long as possible as they are making food and helping the bulbs to swell. However, in late summer towards the end of the growing season the foliage will naturally start to bend over. When this happens, lay the foliage so that it doesn't shade the neighbouring onion bulbs and prevent sunlight from helping to dry and ripen the outer skin of the onion.

KEEP CARROTS COVERED

By August carrots sown in April and May should be making decent sized roots and you can start to pull them as needed. With maincrop varieties, try and pull every other root in the row, which allows the remaining carrots longer to grow for autumn use. If carrot root fly is a problem in your garden, it's important to keep the plants completely covered with fine mesh or fleece to prevent the second generation of adult flies from laying their eggs at the base of the plant. The flies lay their eggs in August and September and, if not prevented, the tiny maggots can completely ruin a healthy crop of carrots.

SOW NOW

Spinach, beetroot, lettuce, salad leaves, land cress, carrots (early varieties), coriander, radish, salad onions, turnip, chard, Chinese cabbage, spring cabbage, corn salad, chicory.

PLANT NOW

Kale, calabrese, leeks, runner beans, lettuce, dwarf beans, courgettes, marrow, squashes, tomatoes.

HARVEST

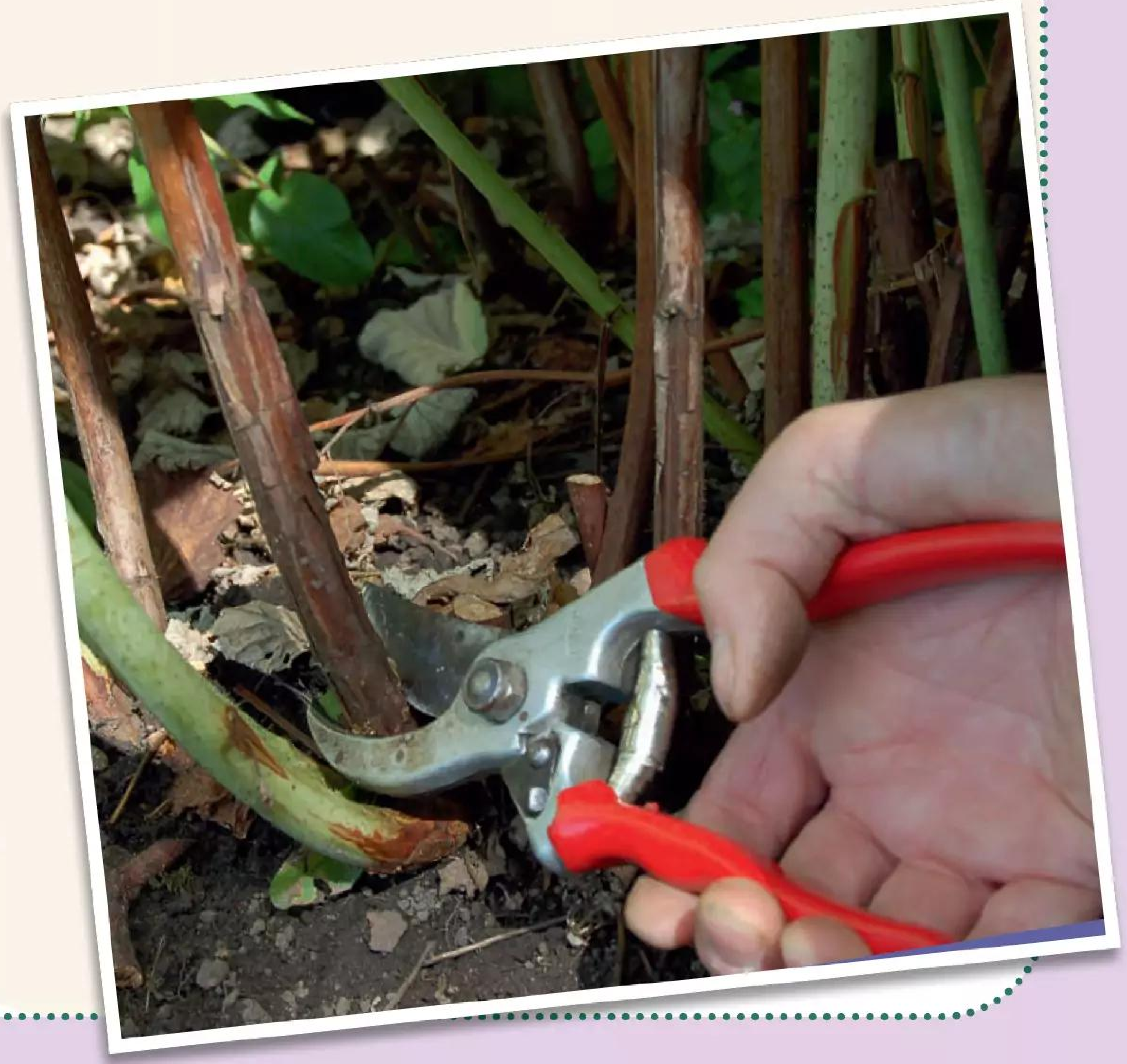
Runner beans, dwarf beans, broad beans, peas, potatoes, squash, cabbage, calabrese, rhubarb, lettuce, radish, spring onions, chard, carrots, beetroot, courgettes, turnips, spinach, herbs, globe artichokes, currants, cherries, raspberries, loganberries, apricots, strawberries and herbs.

NET CHERRY FRUIT

Late cherries such as 'Morello' that are ideal for growing on a north-facing wall will be ripening now and it's essential to protect them from birds with fleece or netting. If not covered, blackbirds and starlings will strip the ripening fruits very quickly. When netting trees, make sure the cover encloses the tree to prevent bird getting under the net and becoming trapped and check daily for tears in the net and trapped birds.

PRUNE SUMMER RASPBERRIES

When the last of the summer fruiting raspberries have been picked, it's time to carry out their annual prune, which basically consists of cutting out the canes that have fruited and leaving the new shoots for next year. The sooner you can do this after fruiting the better, as removing the old canes allows more room for the new growth and it also means the plant isn't wasting energy on old growth. Identifying the growth to prune out is easy as the base of the canes is brown and woody, whereas the new canes are still soft and green. If in doubt, check the top of the canes where you'll see the remains of the fruiting stems. Cut the old, fruited canes down to ground level and then assess the number of new canes. If there looks to be too many and growth is crowded, cut out some of the weaker ones.



GROW SOFT FRUIT CORDONS

Freshly picked fruit from the plot is delicious and one of the great joys of growing your own. The flavours are so much better than shop bought fruit, simply because you can allow the fruits to fully ripen on the plant.

To grow a wide selection of fruit in the garden or allotment can take up a fair bit of room if everything is grown as bushes, but where space is limited, many different types of fruit can be grown as cordons against a wall or fence. This method takes up less space and the plants look very decorative. Top fruit such as apples and pears are often grown this way, but it's also possible to grow a selection of soft fruit as cordons.

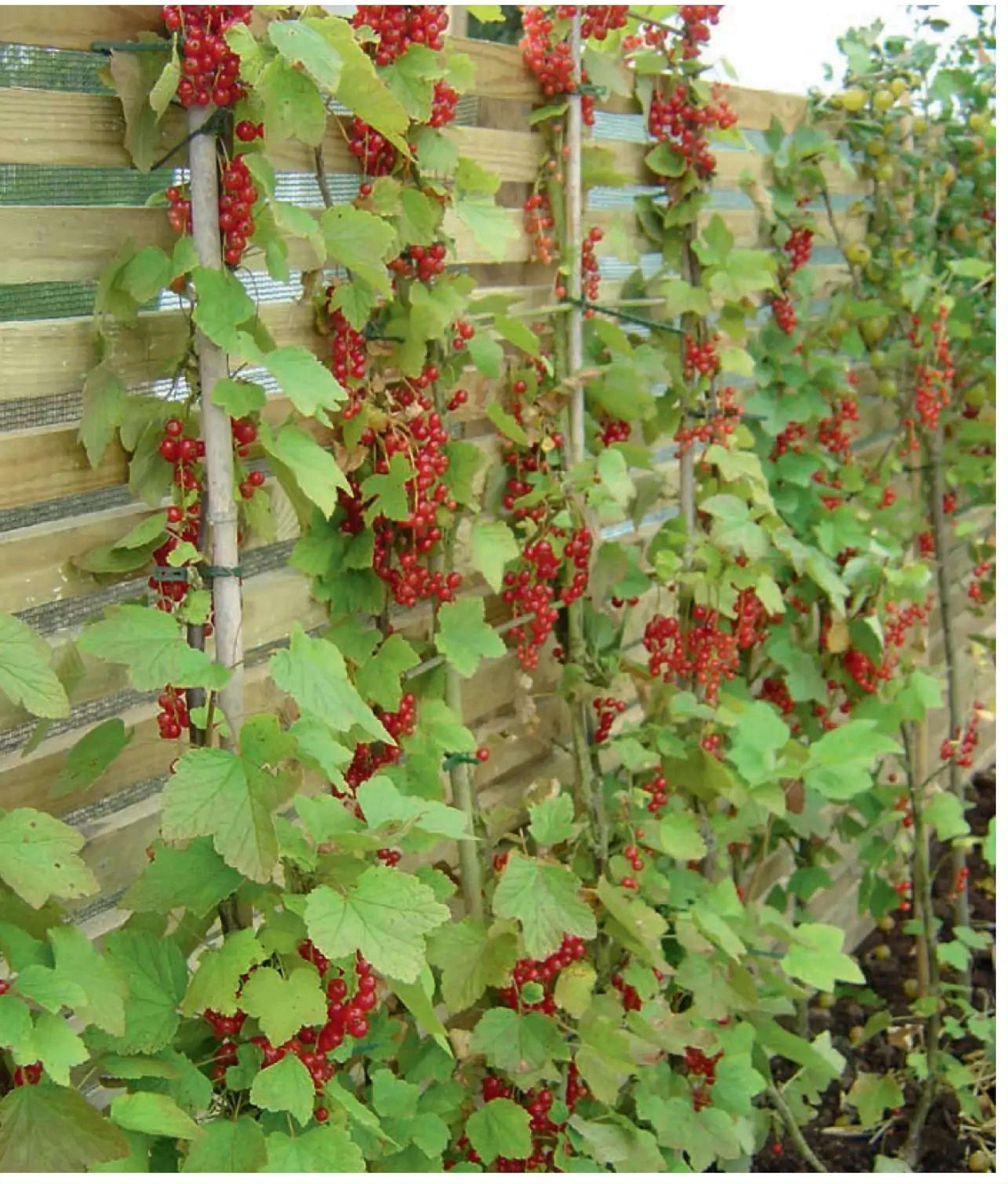
When it comes to choosing types of soft fruit to train as cordons, you need the ones that produce their flowers and fruit on short stems growing from the main branch. Redcurrants, whitecurrants and gooseberries are ideal for growing this way, but blackcurrants are not suitable because of how they grow and fruit on long stems.

The cordon, which is basically a single stem will need pruning every summer to maintain the shape, but once established they are very easy to look after.

Plant the cordons against a sunny wall around 45cm (18in) apart and grow as a vertical cordon to a height of anything between 120-180cm (4-6ft). You'll need to tie the main vertical stem to a cane or wires for support. Through the summer side shoots will develop and these will need pruning back a couple of times through the season to 5-7.5cm (2-3in) to create short side stems (spurs).

It's on the short spurs that flowers and fruit develop the following year.

Trained cordons can be bought from nurseries, but you can create your own very easily. Buy bushes that have a dominant stem and after planting, prune out all but the main stem and train it up the cane. In one season it should grow to at least 90cm (3ft).



DO IT NOW

■ Harvest summer calabrese as soon as the heads are fully formed and don't be tempted to leave them on the plant as in warm weather they soon blow and turn to flower.

■ Pick late varieties of redcurrant such as 'Rovada' which ripen in late July and early August.

■ Sow the seeds of spring cabbage now to produce young plants for planting out into the garden in late September or early October. Either start the seed off in a plug tray or sow a short row in the veg plot.

■ When early peas have all been picked, remove the old haulms and compost them, but leave the roots in the soil as they contain nitrogen nodules that will help to feed the next crop.

■ Gently fork out shallots when they are at the size you want and allow them to dry slowly on an open crate or on a rack outside in the warm sunshine.

IN THE GREENHOUSE

PLANT SECOND CROPPING POTATOES

Growing potatoes under cover is a great way to get a crop early in the season, but it's also a good way to get new potatoes in late autumn and winter. At this time of the year you can often buy seed potatoes for August planting, or you may have held back some seed potatoes from spring by keeping them in a cool place or fridge. Planted now in large pots and kept well-watered, they will soon start to grow. In spring early varieties take around 13 weeks to develop, but at this time of the year tuber development is a little slower as the days are getting shorter. You should, however, get a crop of new potatoes for Christmas.

WHAT TO DO IN AUGUST

1 Harvest your crops regularly when they are at their best, because if you leave them too long, they may spoil.

2 Mist cucumber plants with water during the day to help deter red spider mites that dislike cool, moist conditions.

3 As salad crops come to an end, clear the old plants and prepare the ground for another crop.

4 Keep on top of weeds growing between your veg as they rob them of valuable water and nutrients.

5 Feed all fruiting plants such as tomatoes, cucumbers, melons, peppers etc. weekly with a high potash liquid fertiliser to help the fruits to develop and ripen.

HARVEST & FEED CUCUMBERS

Cucumbers should be in full harvest now and the secret to keeping them growing and cropping for a while longer is to pick regularly and feed the plants to keep them vigorous. Cucumbers are greedy plants and although regular feeding with a high potash fertiliser helps to promote flowers and fruit development, they also benefit from an occasional nitrogen feed to keep the plants healthy and growing, especially when they are producing fruits. A little dried blood sprinkled around the plants and watered in or a high nitrogen liquid fertiliser can be given to give the plants a much-needed boost. As well as the high nitrogen feed, continue with high potash feeding once a week.

SEPTEMBER

10 MINUTE JOBS

PICK APPLES

The first apples of the season are ripening now and need to be picked as soon as the fruits leave the trees when given a gentle twist. The exact time of ripening varies on location and the fruits on the sunny side of the tree ripen first.

PREPARE SOIL

Before you plant spring cabbage plants into the garden, prepare the ground by forking it over lightly and tread the area to firm the soil. Sprinkle a light dressing of a general fertiliser such as Growmore or pelleted poultry to give the plants a good start.

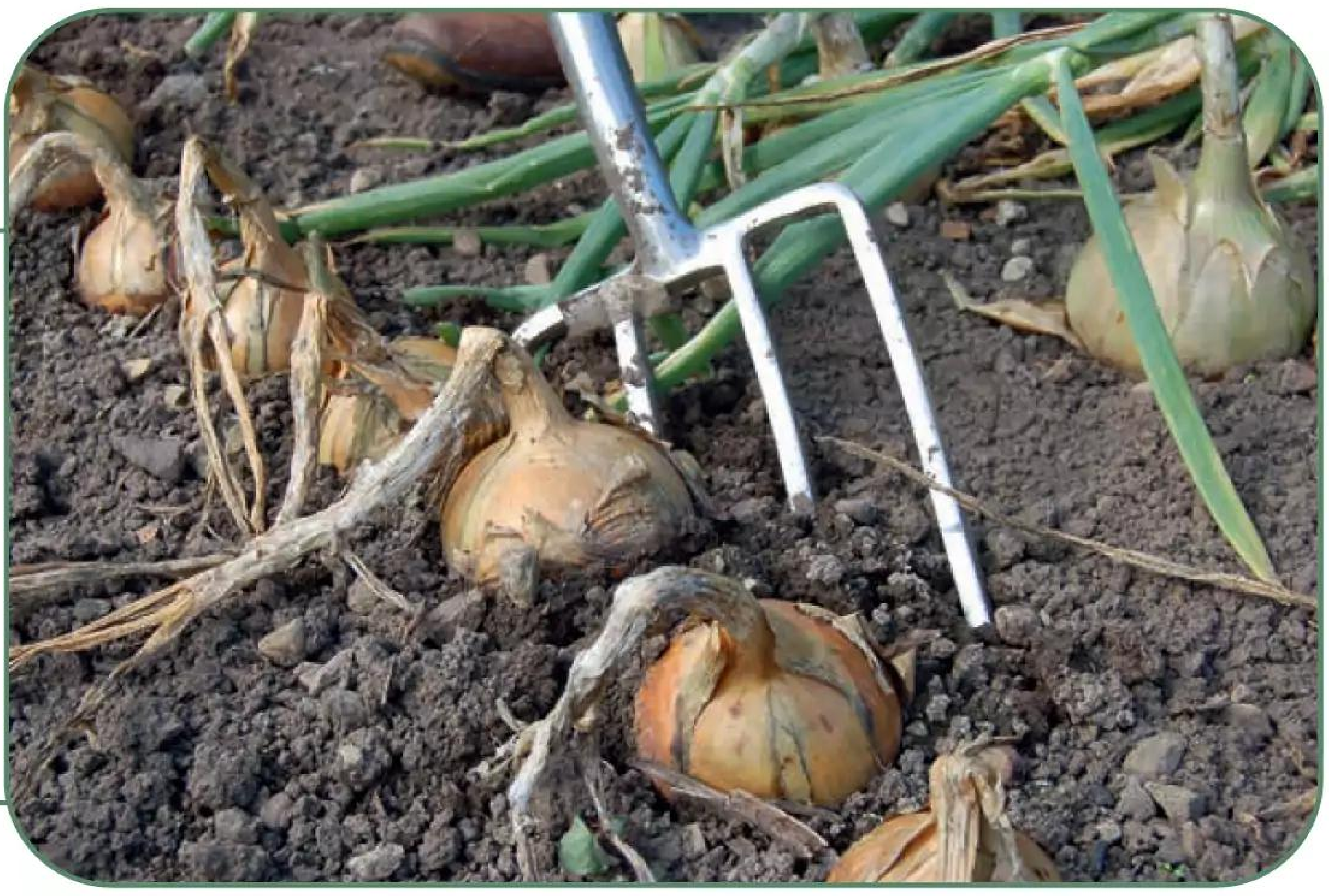
DRY 'BORLOTTI' BEANS

If you intend to pick and dry beans such as 'Borlotti' for winter use, pick the beans when they are fully formed and the pods are dry. Do this on a fine day and pop open the pods before laying them in a tray to carry on drying.

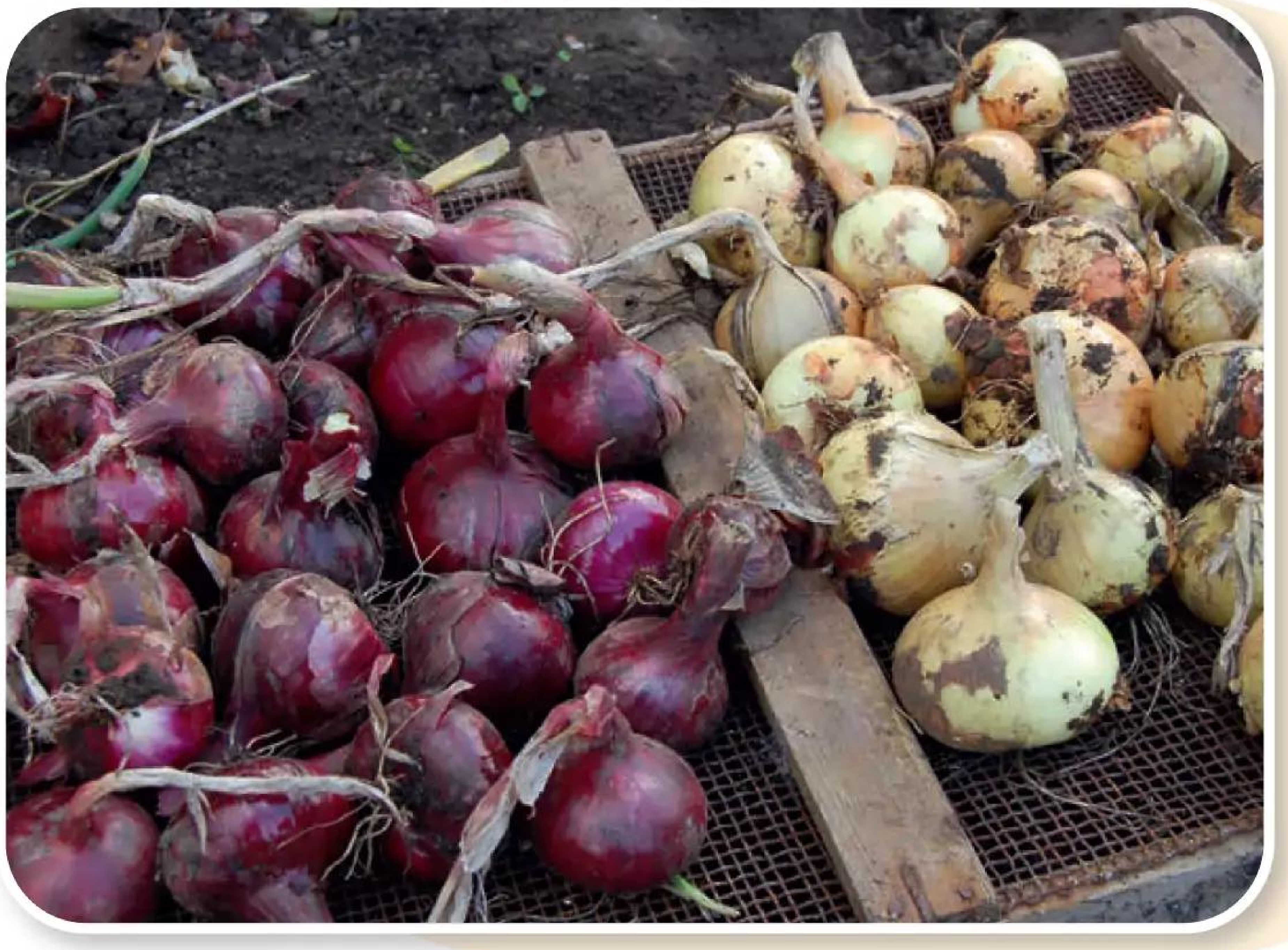
PRESERVE HERBS

Finish picking the fresh, new shoots and leaves off herbs before the foliage starts to dry out and die back in autumn. Many such as thyme, bay, mint and marjoram can be tied into small, loose bunches and dried, or frozen in icecubes for winter use.

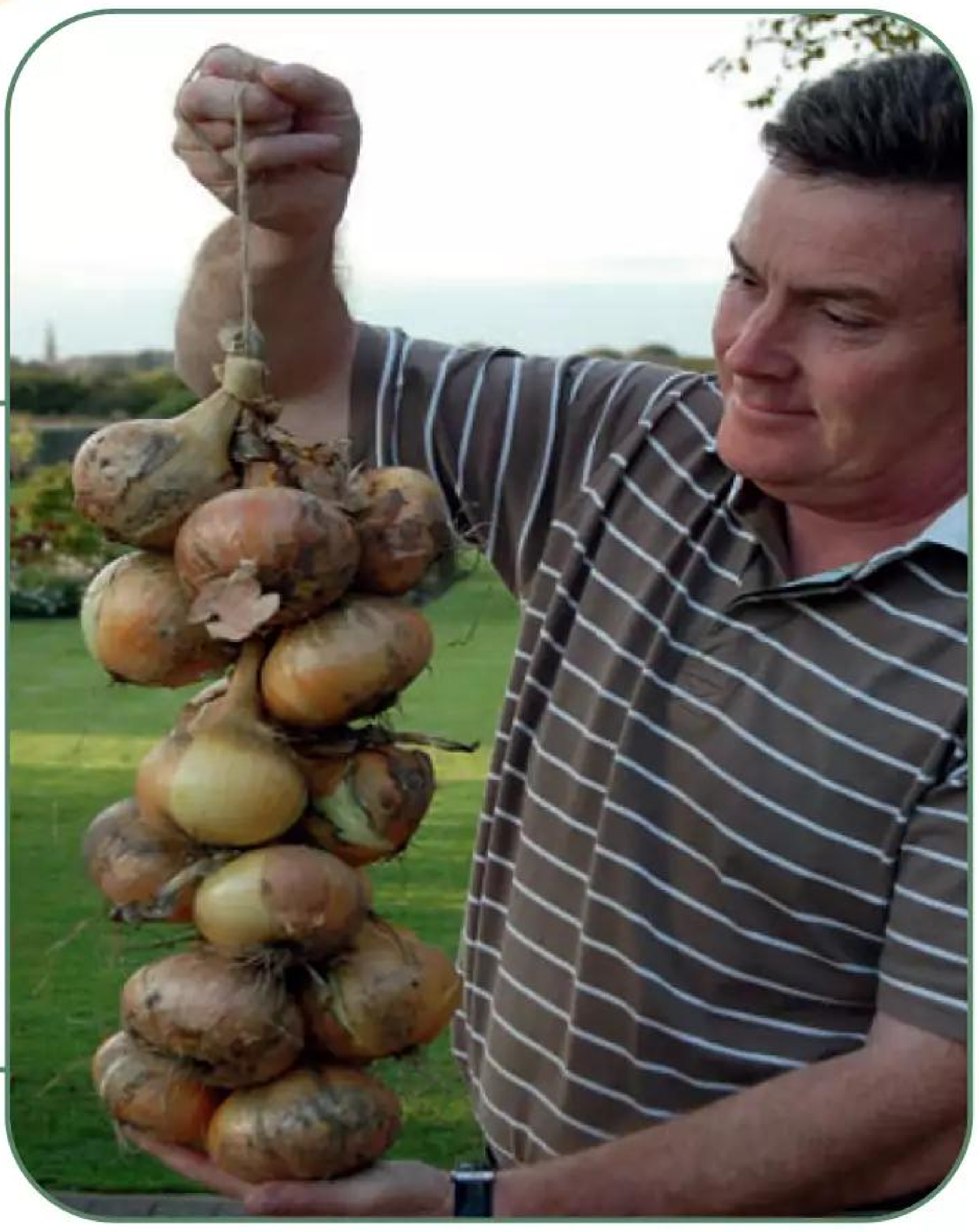
LIFT AND STORE ONIONS



STEP 1: Main crop onions should be ready for harvesting this month when the bulbs have naturally started to ripen and the tops have bent down. If the onions still look green you can stop them growing and encourage ripening by gently lifting the bulbs with a garden fork. Breaking the roots prevents the bulbs drinking in more water and it helps them to dry out ready for lifting and storing.



STEP 2: Once the tops of the onions have turned brown and the skins are ripening, lift the bulbs and carry on ripening them in trays or wire racks where there is good air circulation. Keep checking the onions and turning them to develop a brown papery skin. This can be done outside if the weather is dry and fine, but in wet conditions bring the onions under cover to keep them dry.



STEP 3: Once the foliage has totally dried out and the skins have evenly ripened, the onions can be stored for winter use. This can be done by keeping them in trays or by bagging them in nets. Alternatively, you can tie them to create an onion rope by twisting the old leaves through a loop of string. They can then be hung in a dry, cool, but frost-free place until needed.

HARVEST BLACKBERRIES

Keep picking sweet, juicy blackberries little and often as they ripen on the plants. This helps the smaller fruits to develop and ripen over the coming weeks to extend the fruiting season. Although they are lovely eaten fresh, they also freeze very well by placing them on a tray in the freezer. Once frozen they can be bagged up and used over the winter in fruit pies and puddings.

PICK YOUR PLUMS

Fresh, home-grown plums picked from the tree when fully ripe are a real treat at this time of the year. Plums on the same tree don't all ripen at the same time, so you need to check the fruits on a regular basis and pick when ripe before the birds peck them or wasps damage them. The fruits on the sunny side of the tree are often the first to be picked.

SOW NOW

Spinach, lettuce, salad leaves, kale (for winter leaves), radish, salad onions, chard, spring cabbage, corn salad, chicory, turnip.

PLANT NOW

Overwintering onions, spring cabbage, lettuce, Chinese cabbage, strawberries.

HARVEST

Runner beans, dwarf beans, potatoes, squash, cabbage, calabrese, lettuce, radish, spring onions, chard, carrots, beetroot, courgettes, turnips, spinach, herbs, autumn raspberries, apples, plums, tomatoes.

FINISH SUMMER APPLE PRUNING

Fruit trees such as apples and pears are pruned through the summer when trained as decorative cordons, step-overs or espaliers to maintain the formal shape and to create short side shoots known as spurs. It's on the short spurs that flowers and fruits develop the following year. Some tree forms are also summer pruned to reduce long, vigorous growth and to encourage a spur system of branches.

Pruning is normally done in late summer, but if you've not done it yet, there is still time. Basically, all you do is cut back this year's new growth to around 4cm (1½in), just above a bud. Done now the tree won't make any new growth over autumn and it will hold its shape until spring growth starts. Through the autumn and winter, fat fruit buds will develop on the short spurs that will blossom and fruit next year.

RIPEN OUTDOOR TOMATOES

Getting outdoor tomatoes to ripen can be a problem some years, especially if we get a cool spell of weather. Ideally, we want as many of the fruits to start changing colour while the temperatures are still fairly warm, and certainly before the weather turns cool and damp. To help the fruits ripen, remove foliage that has started to turn yellow as this will increase the air flow around the fruit. If growing in pots, stand them in a warm, sheltered position where they get maximum sunlight. Keep the compost just moist and feed with a high potash fertiliser and on cool nights, cover with fleece to trap warm air around the fruits.

PLANT STRAWBERRIES

Although the fruiting season for strawberries is over, September is an important time in the strawberry calendar. Early autumn is the traditional time to plant new plants that have been raised from runners earlier in the summer. The advantage of planting now is the young plants will be able to make a good root system over the autumn while the soil is still warm. This results in much stronger plants next spring that will get off to a good start and produce plenty of fruit. Strawberry plants are very adaptable, but regardless of whether you are planting out in the open ground or growing in containers, the sooner you can get them planted and established, the better.

Strawberries grow very well in pots to stand outside on a patio or paved area. Plastic or terracotta can be used, and you can use either simple pots or special strawberry pots that have side planting holes. Because the plants are going to be in the container for two or maybe three seasons, use a good compost. Mix multipurpose compost and John Innes compost half and half which gives a good structured compost with good water and nutrient holding capacity.

Hanging baskets can also be used and this is a great way to grow them as it protects the fruits from slugs and snails! Simple plastic pots are ideal, or you could use a more decorative basket. In a 25-30cm (10-12in) basket you need three plants which will fill out and produce fruits that hang over the sides of the basket. Again, use a good compost mix to keep the plants healthy and growing.

Planting in rows or on a grid system in the garden is the traditional method of growing and it works well if you have room. Choose a sunny position and prepare the ground by working in well-rotted organic matter to improve the soil. Planting distances vary, depending on space available, but ideally the minimum spacing should be 30cm (12in) or slightly wider if possible.

Do it now

■ Help squashes and pumpkins to ripen by lifting them off the ground slightly on a stone or up-turned seed tray. This increases air flow around the fruits and keeps the base dry.

■ Plant Chinese cabbage out into the garden and keep it well watered. It grows quickly and should develop crispy heads for harvesting in late September.

■ Once you have picked the last of the sweetcorn, the old plants can be removed, chopped up or passed through a shredder, before adding to the compost heap.

■ As the tops of main crop potatoes naturally start to die down or if blight is around, cut down the haulms to soil level and get rid of them. The potatoes can then be left in the soil for a few more weeks until you are ready to lift.

■ Old fruited stems on blackcurrants can be pruned out to open up the bush and to allow the new growth to ripen in the autumn sunshine.

IN THE GREENHOUSE

HARVEST PEPPERS AS THEY RIPEN

Peppers grow best under cover where the extra warmth and protection helps the fruits to develop and ripen from late summer onwards. Many pepper plants will continue to grow and fruit well into autumn if the weather is mild and you maintain a dry atmosphere around the plants. If too cold and damp, the foliage and fruits can soon develop moulds and start to spoil. Although the fruits can be eaten green, the flavour improves if you allow them to ripen to yellow, orange or red, depending on the variety being grown. One of the sweet peppers to grow is 'King of the North' which does very well in more northerly plots and always produces a good crop.

WHAT TO DO IN SEPTEMBER

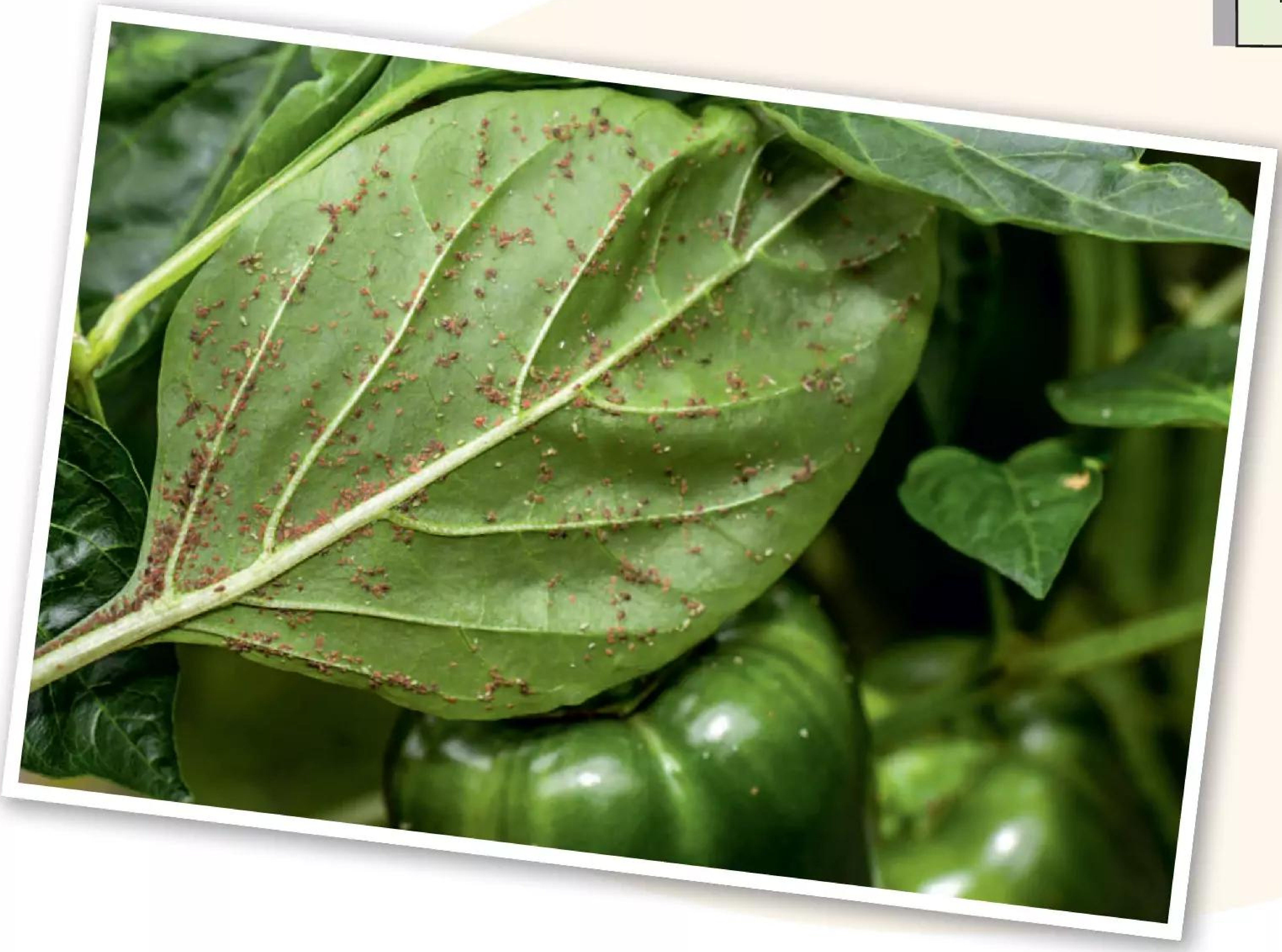
1 Water tomatoes to prevent fruit skins splitting. This can sometimes be a problem, especially at the end of the growing season. It's a result of the skins hardening in hot weather or if the plants have been allowed to dry out a little. As the nights cool down or when the plants are watered, the skins split. Avoid this by keeping the root moist and close the vents late afternoon to retain warmth around the plants.

2 Ripen onions in the greenhouse. Bring them under cover in trays to help the bulbs ripen in the warmth of the greenhouse or polytunnel. The drier and riper the skins, the better the onions will keep through winter.

3 Check over plants and pick off any foliage that is diseased, yellowing or dead to help keep the plants healthy and to prevents moulds and fungal diseases from spreading.

4 Aid ripening of tomatoes, peppers and other fruits by ventilating on mild days to keep a good flow of fresh air around the plants.

5 Sow some salad leaves direct in the border soil or in containers undercover.



CHECK CROPS FOR PESTS

As the growing season marches on, we often take our foot off the pedal when it comes to controlling pests, but we need to be alert as many pests have a final fling before winter and if not spotted and dealt with, they can cause a great deal of damage to our crops. Look out for late broods of caterpillars on brassicas, aphids and slugs on salad crops, whitefly on tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers and tomato moth caterpillar damage on tomato fruits and foliage. In most cases squashing the pests works well, but for whitefly you can use yellow sticky traps or an organic spray to help control them. A blast of water will also help to wash off insect pests.

OCTOBER

10 MINUTE JOBS

PULL OUT OLD BRASSICAS

As the last of the summer brassicas such as cabbage and calabrese finish, pull out the old plants to finish clearing the plot. All the green waste can be added to the compost heap and to help it break down quickly, chop the plants up with a spade.

PROTECT OUTDOOR SALAD CROPS

Cover outdoor salad crops over with some garden fleece to give them a little extra protection through autumn and into winter. The fleece not only protects from early autumn frosts and drying winds, it also keeps off hungry pigeons looking for some fresh green leaves.

RECYCLE PLANT LABELS

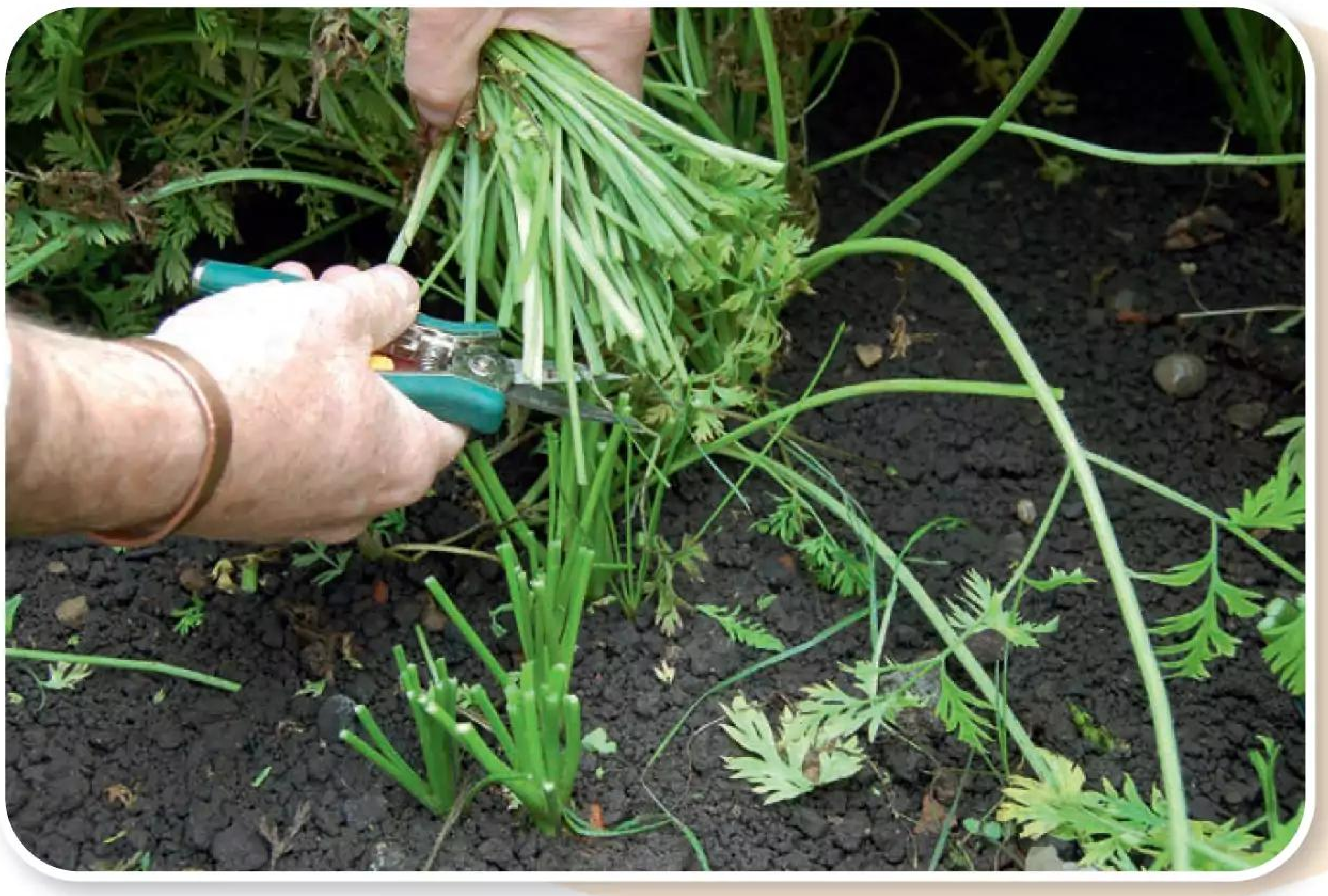
Collect plant labels from the plot as you clear summer vegetables. Rub or scratch off the writing and give them all a good wash in some warm, soapy water. When dry, sort into different sizes, bundle them up and store away ready for next spring.

NET SPRING CABBAGES

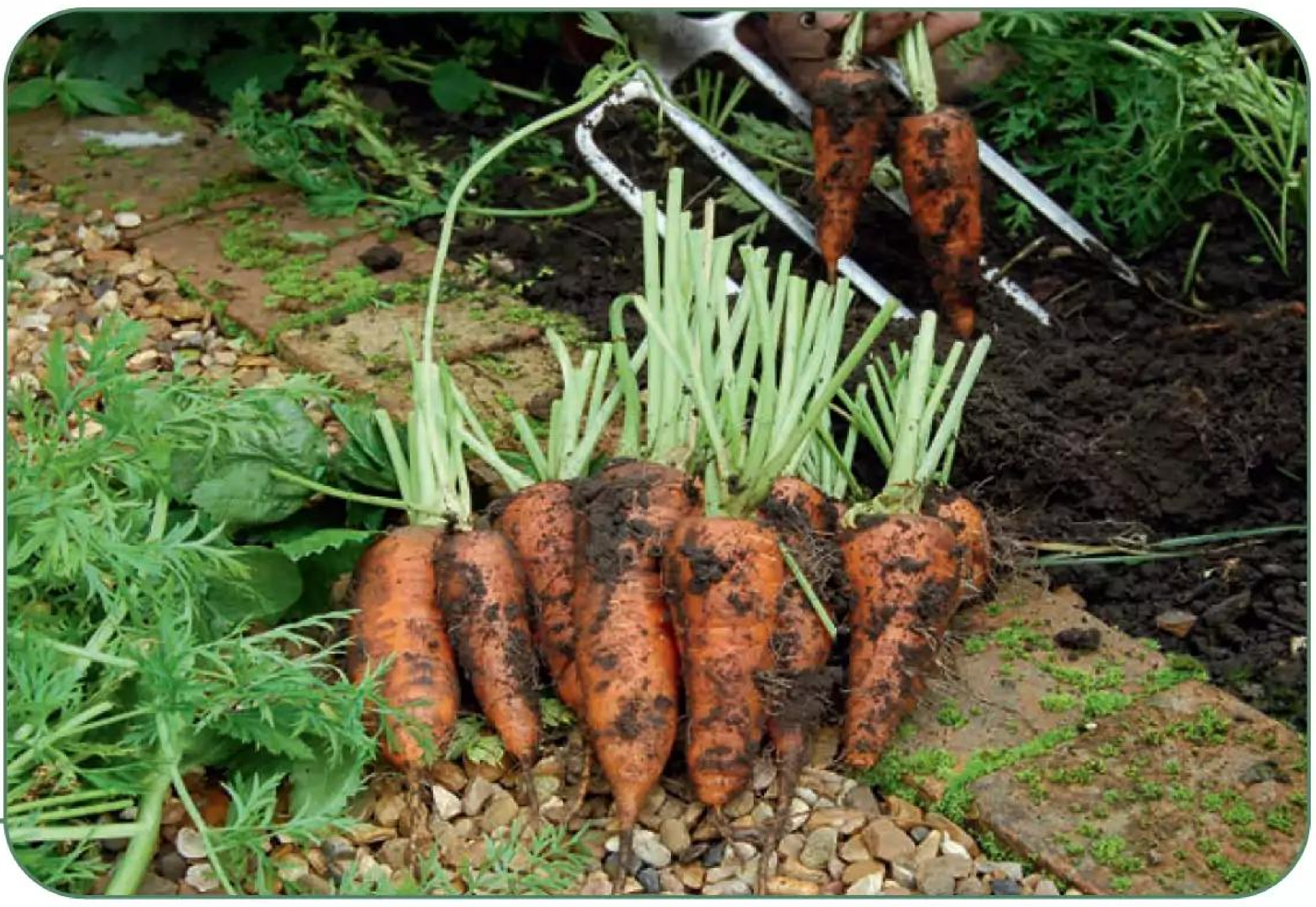
Spring cabbages planted out several weeks ago should be starting to establish and make new foliage while the soil is still warm. This new growth is very appealing to pigeons and rabbits, so make sure the plants are well covered with netting to protect them.

LIFT CARROTS

STEP 1: Homegrown carrots are delicious and well worth growing if you can keep carrot fly off by growing them under an insect-proof mesh. This method works well as long as there are no gaps to allow the adults flies in and you rotate the crop every year. Roots left in over winter can be damaged by a late attack of root fly or heavy frosts, so it is best to lift before winter.



STEP 2: Once the covers have been removed cut down all the foliage to a couple of inches and dispose of it onto the compost heap. This prevents the long leaves getting in the way and the short stumps can be used as handles when lifting the roots. If the soil is dry, water the row a few hours before lifting to make it easier to get the roots out.



STEP 3: Use a garden fork to loosen the soil around the roots and gently pull them out of the ground. If you intend to store some, rub off the loose soil and trim back the leaf stalks completely and then layer the roots in damp sand or old potting compost in crates or buckets and keep them in a cold shed. Alternatively, they can be washed and prepared for the freezer.

SOW NOW

Spinach, lettuce, salad leaves, radish, onions, parsley.

PLANT NOW

Overwintering onions, spring cabbage, lettuce, Chinese cabbage, strawberries.

HARVEST

Runner beans, dwarf beans, potatoes, squash, pumpkins, kohl rabi, cabbage, leeks, lettuce, radish, spring onions, chard, carrots, beetroot, turnips, marrows, courgettes, spinach, herbs, autumn raspberries, apples, and pears.

SOW BROAD BEANS

Late October or early November is the traditional time for sowing broad bean seeds to produce strong plants for overwintering. The benefit of sowing in autumn is an earlier crop next year. This method works best when we get a cold, dry winter, as in a very wet winter the plants can suffer especially on heavy, clay soils. Varieties that are ideal for autumn sowing include, 'Aquadulce Claudia', 'Valenciana', and 'The Sutton', all of which are winter hardy. Sow the seed directly outside into prepared ground, or start the seeds off in cell trays in a cold frame and plant out when the young plants are a few inches tall.

HARVEST MAINCROP POTATOES

October is the ideal time to lift maincrop potatoes from the ground before the soil gets too wet and cold and slugs become a major problem! Years ago, the autumn half-term was known as potato picking week and it still serves as a good reminder.

Cut off all the tops first if it hasn't already been done and then lift the roots with a fork. Try and do this on a dry day so that you can leave the tubers on the surface for a few hours to dry. Any soil can then be rubbed off and the potatoes stored in breathable bags in a cool dark place.

Do it now

- Harvest winter squashes when they are fully ripe, which is when the skin is hard and a rich colour. If stored in a cool shed they will keep for several months.

- Plant overwintering onion sets while the soil is still fairly warm and not too wet. Plant so that the tip of the bulb is just visible and space the bulbs around 10-15cm (4-6in) apart.

- Keep picking autumn raspberries little and often. If the weather is fine they will often continue ripening through October and into November until the weather turns cold and damp.

- Pile all the vegetable waste in a heap as you clear the plot and when finished you can mix it together and add to the compost heap.

- Apply grease bands around the trunks of fruit trees to prevent wingless female winter moths climbing the trees to lay eggs.

PICK APPLES AND PEARS

This month is well into the apple and pear picking season and it's important that you check the fruits on the trees and harvest when they are ready. A general guide is to hold the fruit, give it a gentle twist and if it comes away without too much effort, it's time to harvest. Tasting the fruit is also a good idea if it's a dessert variety.

Remember also, fruits on the sunny side are often ready a little earlier, meaning you don't have to harvest all the fruit off the tree in one go.

When picked, the fruits need sorting and storing. Only store healthy, blemish-free fruits as any with rots will soon spread to the others. You can store apples in crates until needed in as cool a place as possible. Pears don't store as well and need checking regularly as they ripen quickly and soon spoil.

IN THE GREENHOUSE

ENJOY THE LAST TOMATOES OF THE SEASON

If the weather is fair during October the fruits of tomatoes will continue to ripen and in a mild autumn they may even carry on into November. You want to aim to get the vast majority of the fruits to ripen by the end of October. The secret to ripening the last of the fruits is to keep the atmosphere as warm and dry as possible. If cold and damp, they'll stay green and rot. Keep the roots just moist, remove the last of the foliage and close doors and vents mid-afternoon to retain warmth.

PICK AUTUMN FRENCH BEANS

Freshly picked French beans are delicious and although plants growing in the garden have finished by now, you can still enjoy them from the polytunnel. July sown seed will grow quickly and pods will be ready to pick from late September and through October; if you are really lucky, you may even get some in November, weather permitting. Dwarf varieties such as 'Safari', 'Ferrari' or 'Tendergreen' are ideal because they don't take up as much space and you can grow them directly into the soil or in containers. If you grow an early crop as well, it means you can enjoy freshly picked beans for around six months of the year from the garden and polytunnel.

WHAT TO DO IN OCTOBER

1 There is still time to plant or sow a selection of salad crops that will be ready to harvest over the winter months, but hurry.

2 Keep harvesting crops such as lettuce, courgettes, beans, aubergines, peppers, spinach and herbs.

3 For an early crop of broad beans next year, sow the seeds now in the soil or pots. Dwarf varieties that grow to 45-60cm (18-24in) are ideal for growing under cover.

4 Start planting garlic directly into the borders to allow it time to establish a strong root system before winter.

5 Any tender vegetables growing outside in pots can be brought under cover for a little extra protection.

NOVEMBER

10 MINUTE JOBS

WASH GROWING FRAMES

As you do your autumn tidy up, make sure growing frames such as those used to protect carrots and brassicas are gathered together for the winter. If they are a bit grubby, give them a wash down and keep them where they won't blow around over winter.

CHECK STORED POTATOES

Check maincrop potatoes that are being stored. It's important to make sure that the potatoes and hessian or paper sacks they are being stored in are all dry to prevent rots developing. If there is some dampness, dry them out, re-bag and keep them cool.

PREVENT BROWN ROT

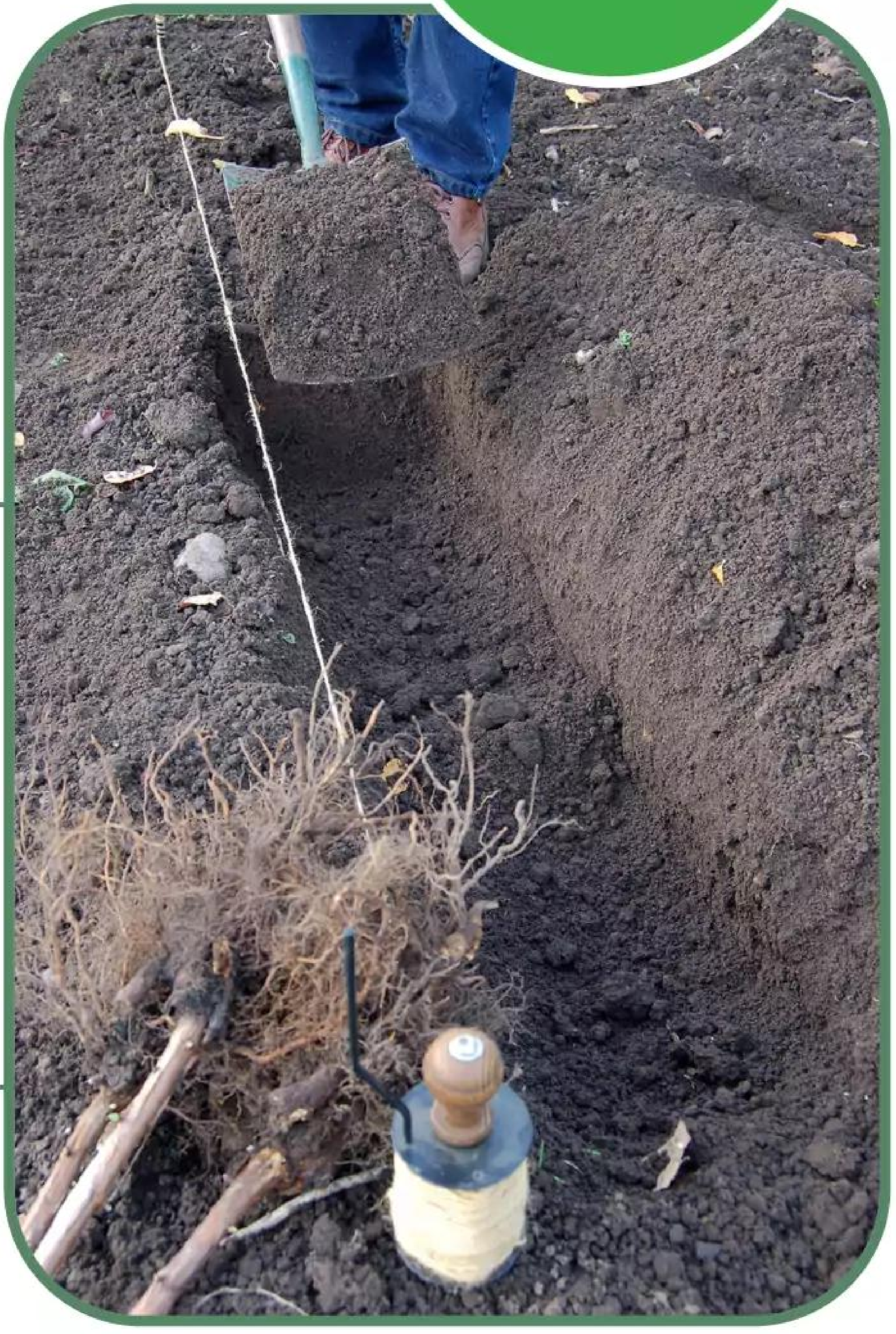
Brown rot causes brown 'mummified' fruits to hang on the tree and is a problem in most seasons on apple, pear and plum trees. To help reduce it next year, have a tidy up around your trees and collect any infected fruits still hanging on the trees or on the ground and burn or bin them.

MONITOR GREASE BANDS

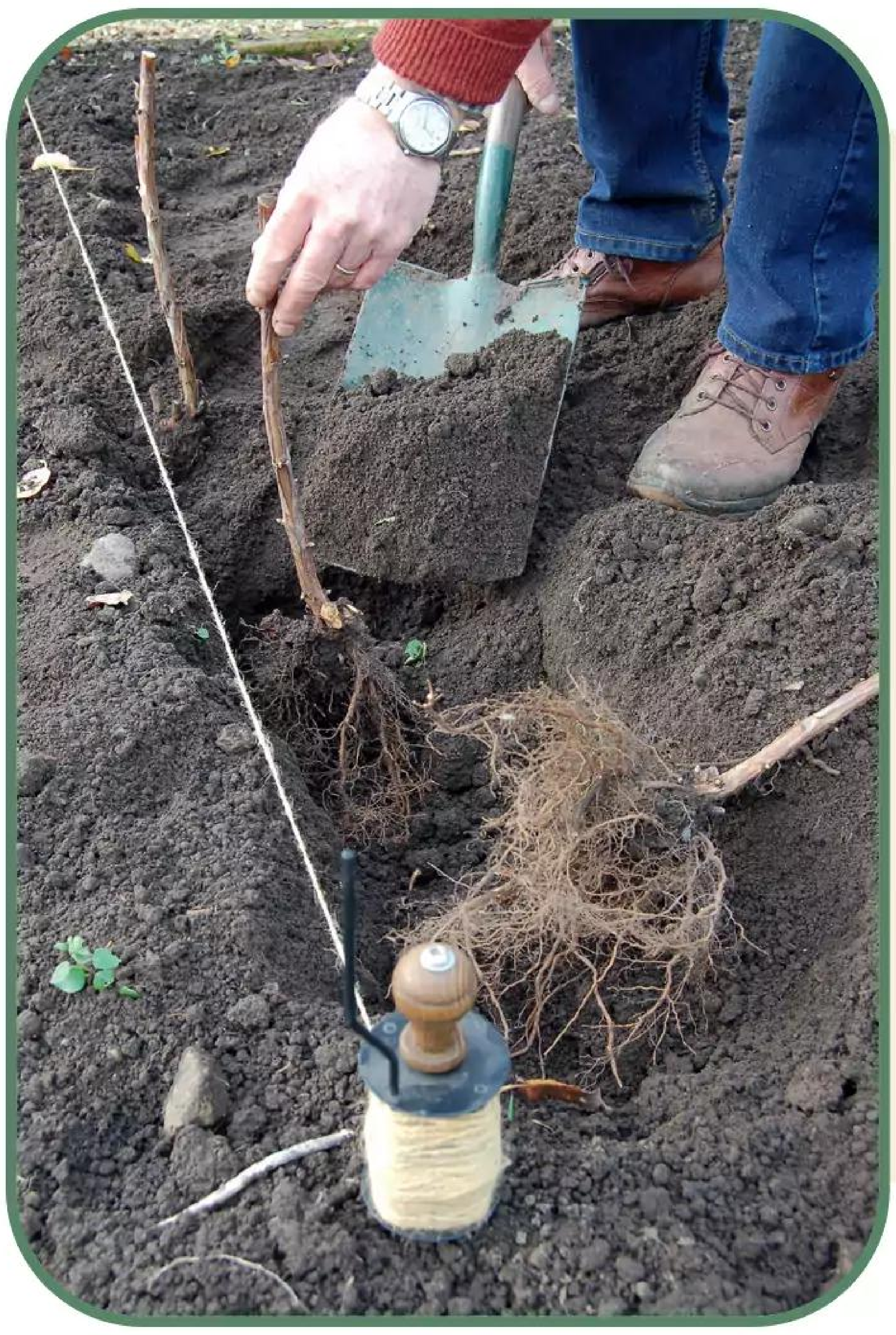
Grease bands applied to fruit trees to help control the wingless winter months from climbing the trunks to lay eggs over winter should be checked to make sure they are firmly attached and sticky. If they've started to dry out, apply a thin layer of fresh grease.

STEP BY STEP

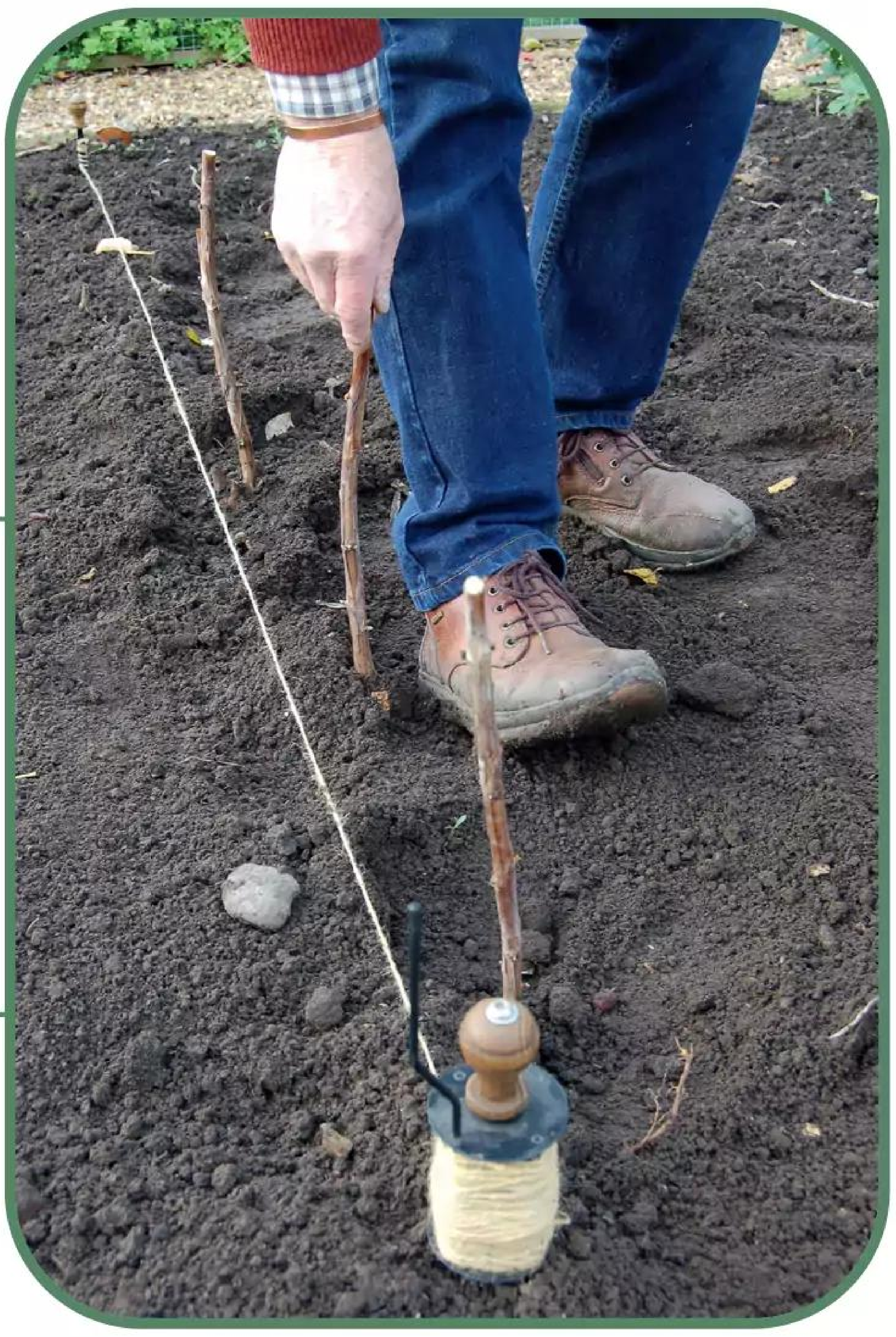
PLANT RASPBERRY CANES



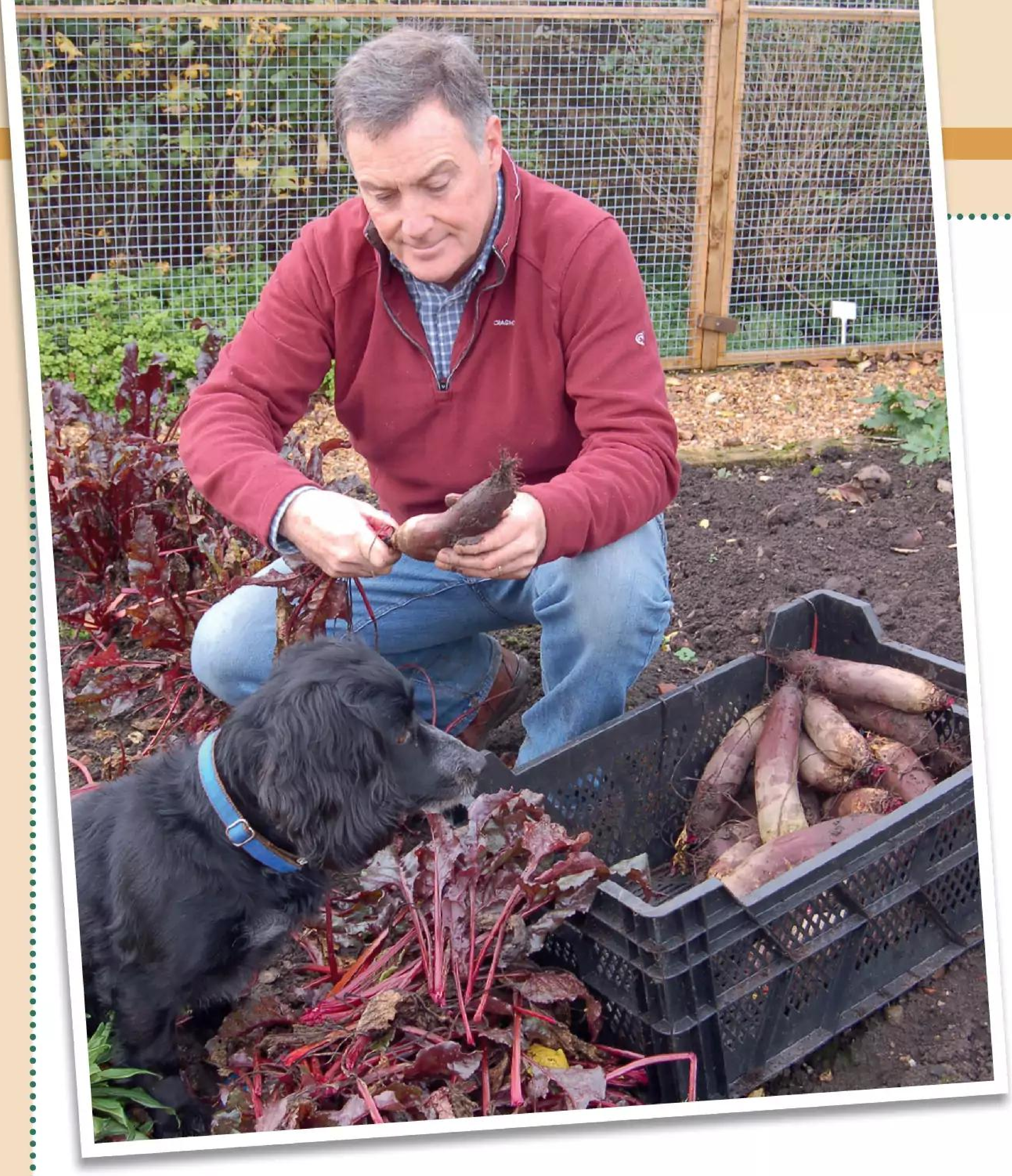
STEP 1: Raspberry canes can be planted any time through the dormant season, but if planted now they have the rest of the autumn to establish a strong root system. Come next spring they will grow away much better to produce strong plants. Prepare the ground by working in plenty of well-rotted organic matter such as manure or garden compost and then dig out a planting trench approximately 20-30cm (8-10in) deep.



STEP 2: Autumn and summer fruiting varieties are planted in the same way. If starting from scratch, buy virus free plants from a reputable grower. If you already have established plants that are healthy and you want to plant another row, carefully lift some of the new canes with a good root system. Trim the long growth down to around 30cm (1ft) and space them approximately 30-45cm (12-18in) apart in the trench and backfill.



STEP 3: Plant so that the roots are just below the soil surface and give the plants a shake to settle the soil around the roots, before firming the plants in with your boots. If the soil is left loose, the plants will rock around and the roots will dry out. Water along the row and use a fork to rake out foot prints. The final pruning to ground level is done in February.



SOW NOW
Broad beans, peas, endive (winter types).

PLANT NOW
Garlic, overwintering onions, soft fruit bushes and cane fruit.

HARVEST
Cabbage, cauliflower, calabrese, kale, leeks, Brussels sprouts, celeriac, lettuce, celery, beetroot, carrots, turnip, swede, potatoes, spinach, apples, pears.

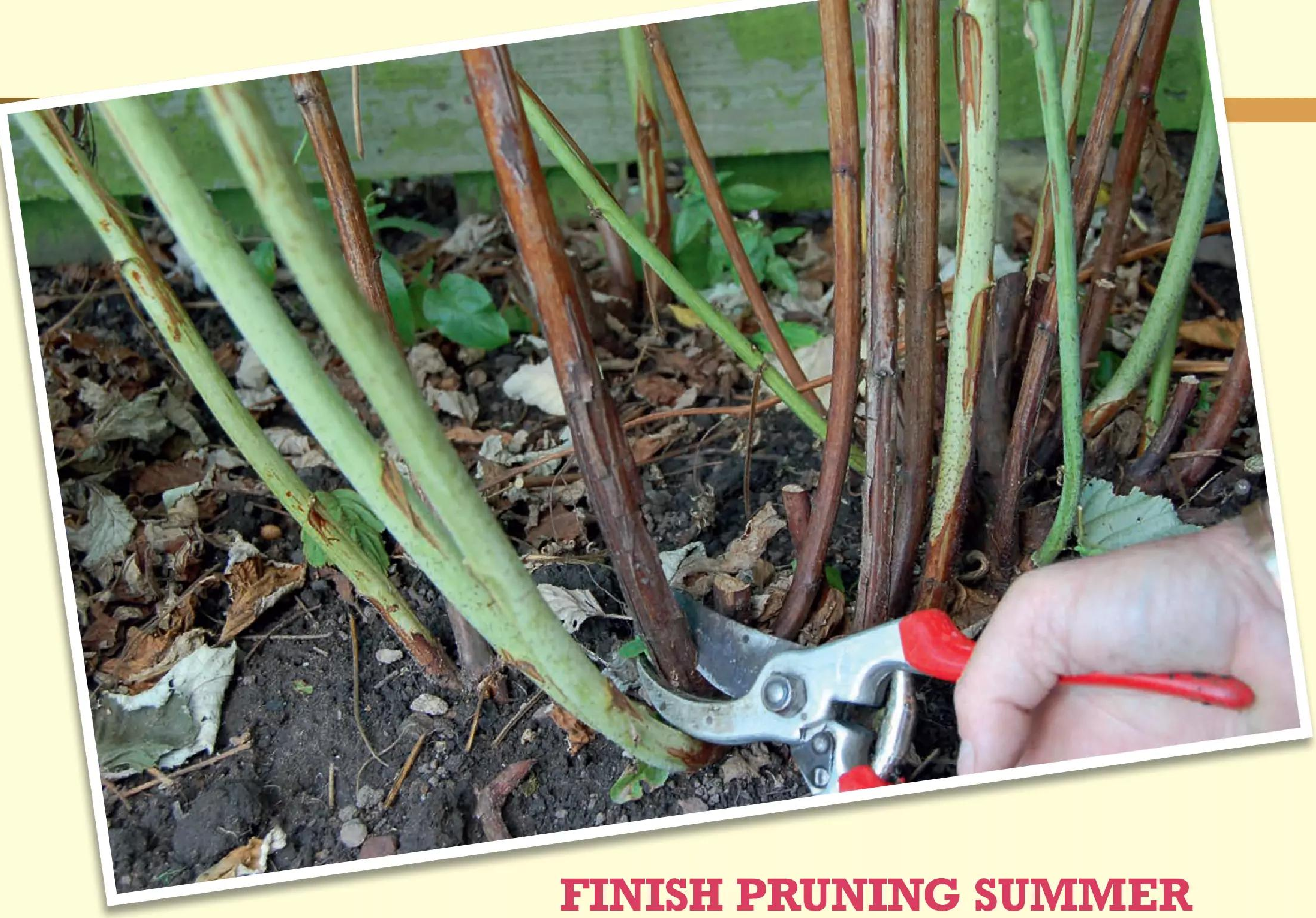
LIFT & STORE MAINCROP BEETROOT

Beetroot is a versatile root veg and can be eaten in many ways. Fresh beetroot can be pulled from the garden through the summer, but for winter use you need to store the roots. Lift the beetroot before the weather gets too cold, twist off the tops and rub off any loose soil. Store in large pots or a crate and lay the roots between layers of just moist sand or old compost. Any variety of beetroot can be stored. Remove the roots as you want them over winter and if kept in a cold, frost-free shed they should store until March or April.

SHRED TOUGH GARDEN WASTE

Autumn is a busy time clearing all the old summer vegetables and generally having an end of season tidy up. All the soft plant waste can be added to the compost heap where it will quickly start to rot down. Tougher stems such as sweetcorn and brassica stalks are slower to break down, but if you can chop them into small pieces they will start to break down much faster. An easy way to do this is to pass the long stems through an electric shredder to chop them into small pieces. When the dryer, tough material is mixed with soft, wet garden waste it makes a good structured garden compost.

BOSCH
2500HP
Jeep



FINISH PRUNING SUMMER RASPBERRIES

If you've not already pruned your summer fruiting raspberries they need to be done as soon as possible. All the old canes that fruited in the summer should be cut out to ground level. These will be brown and woody at the base and still carrying the old fruit stalks at the top. The new canes that haven't fruited, which are younger looking and green-brown need tying to the wire supports.

Do iT now

- Chard grown for winter use occasionally runs to seed because of a check in growth. Any plants that have produced a tall flower stalk need grubbing out.

- Young broad bean plants can be planted out into their permanent position in a sheltered part of the garden. Water them in to settle the roots, but don't cover with cloches as they need to be grown hard.

- Garlic cloves can be planted out onto the garden in well-drained soil. Plant the cloves around 5cm (2in) deep and 15cm (6in) apart.

- The tall ferny stems on asparagus can be cut down to ground level when they have turned yellow and are starting to collapse.

- Rake out autumn leaves from below fruit bushes to expose the ground and add them to the compost heap.

IN THE GREENHOUSE

SALADS AND CHARD FOR WINTER USE

One of the great things about growing in a greenhouse or polytunnel is the ability to extend the growing season at both ends of the year. If you like salads, it means you can be picking some form of salad leaf for much of the year and the range you can grow is huge. Lettuce and salad leaf seeds sown in September will be ready to start harvesting now as you need them. You can also grow Swiss chard in pots in the polytunnel and these will grow through the winter as long as they are kept moist. The young new leaves and tender stalks can be used in salads and if left to develop, the thicker stalks are great when braised.

WHAT TO DO IN NOVEMBER

1 If you fancy a few early peas next year, try sowing a hardy, dwarf variety such as 'Meteor' directly into the polytunnel border while the soil is still warm.

2 Continue to remove salad and vegetable crops when you have finished harvesting them to clear the ground.

3 Bring pots of perennial herbs inside to protect them from excessive wet over the winter months.

4 There is still time to sow winter salads such as lettuce, rocket, winter purslane, spinach and oriental brassicas, either in trays or directly into the soil.

5 Pak choi sown in August or September can be harvested while it is young and fresh.

STILL TIME TO PLANT GARLIC

Don't worry if you haven't got your garlic in yet, because there is still time when planting directly into a polytunnel. Although garlic cloves can be planted outside, when grown under cover they generally do very well and produce good sized bulbs. This is because the roots have time to establish before winter and come spring when temperatures rise, the plants start into growth early to give them a longer growing season. Plant the individual cloves into soil that's been improved with plenty of organic matter. Plant approximately 15-20cm (6-8in) apart and 5cm (2in) deep. Water the ground and a new garlic shoot will appear in a few weeks, but more importantly, it will be developing a strong root system to over-winter.

DECEMBER

10 MINUTE JOBS

SORT OUT YOUR SEED BOX

If like me you seem to accumulate far too many packets of seeds, it's well worth sitting down with a cup of coffee to go through your seed box. Packets that are way out of date or part packets of old seed can all be thrown away.

CLEAN FLEECE AND NETTING

Garden fleece and netting that was used in the growing season can be neatly folded up and stored away until it's needed again. If it's dirty, soak it first in hot soapy water with a dash of disinfectant to kill any fungal spores.

PROTECT OUTDOOR TAPS

Make sure outdoor taps are protected from freezing over the winter. If not being used over winter turn the tap off at the stop-cock, otherwise insulate the pipes and protect the tap with one of the insulated covers that can easily be removed when you want water.

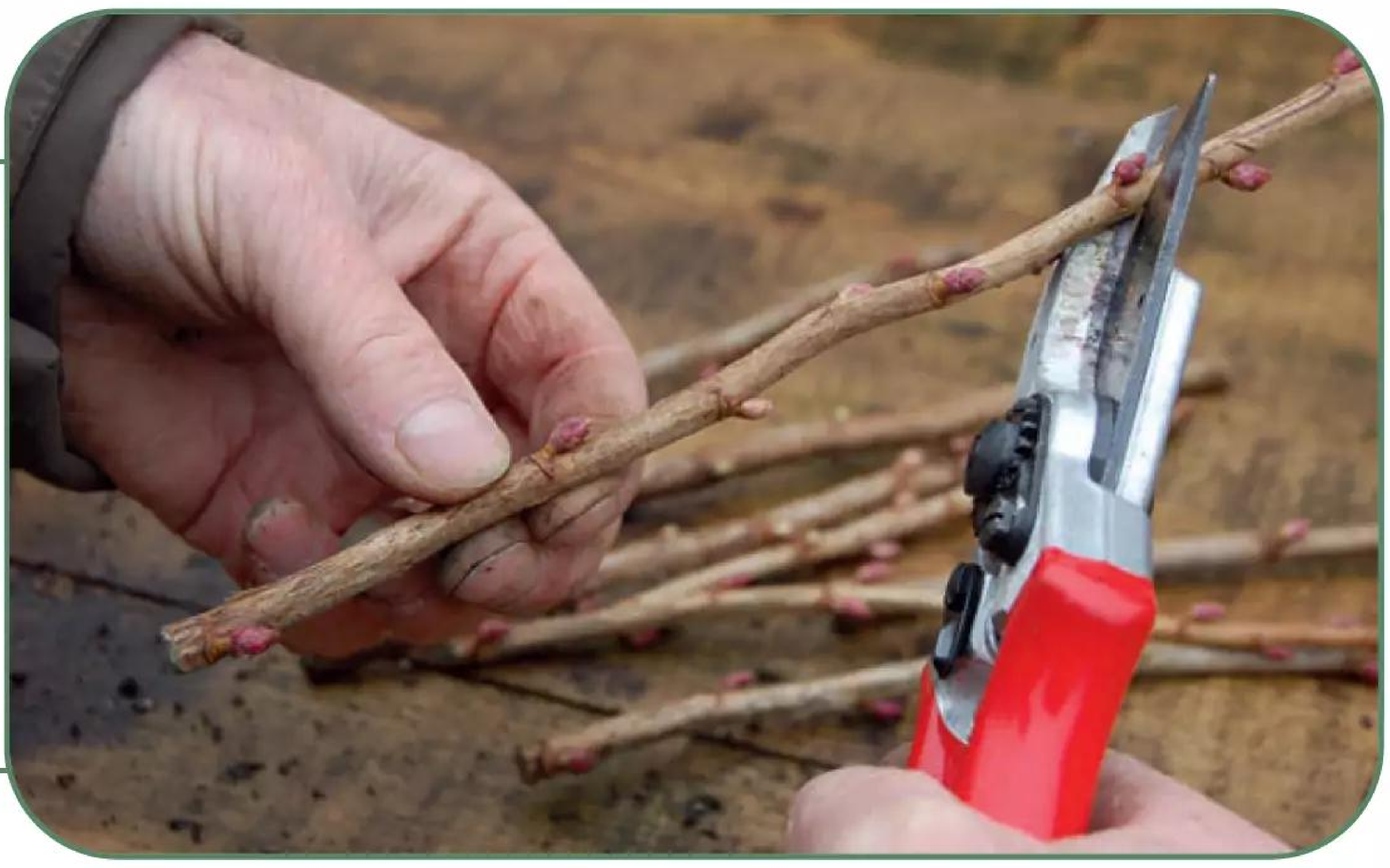
CHECK STORED BEAN SEEDS

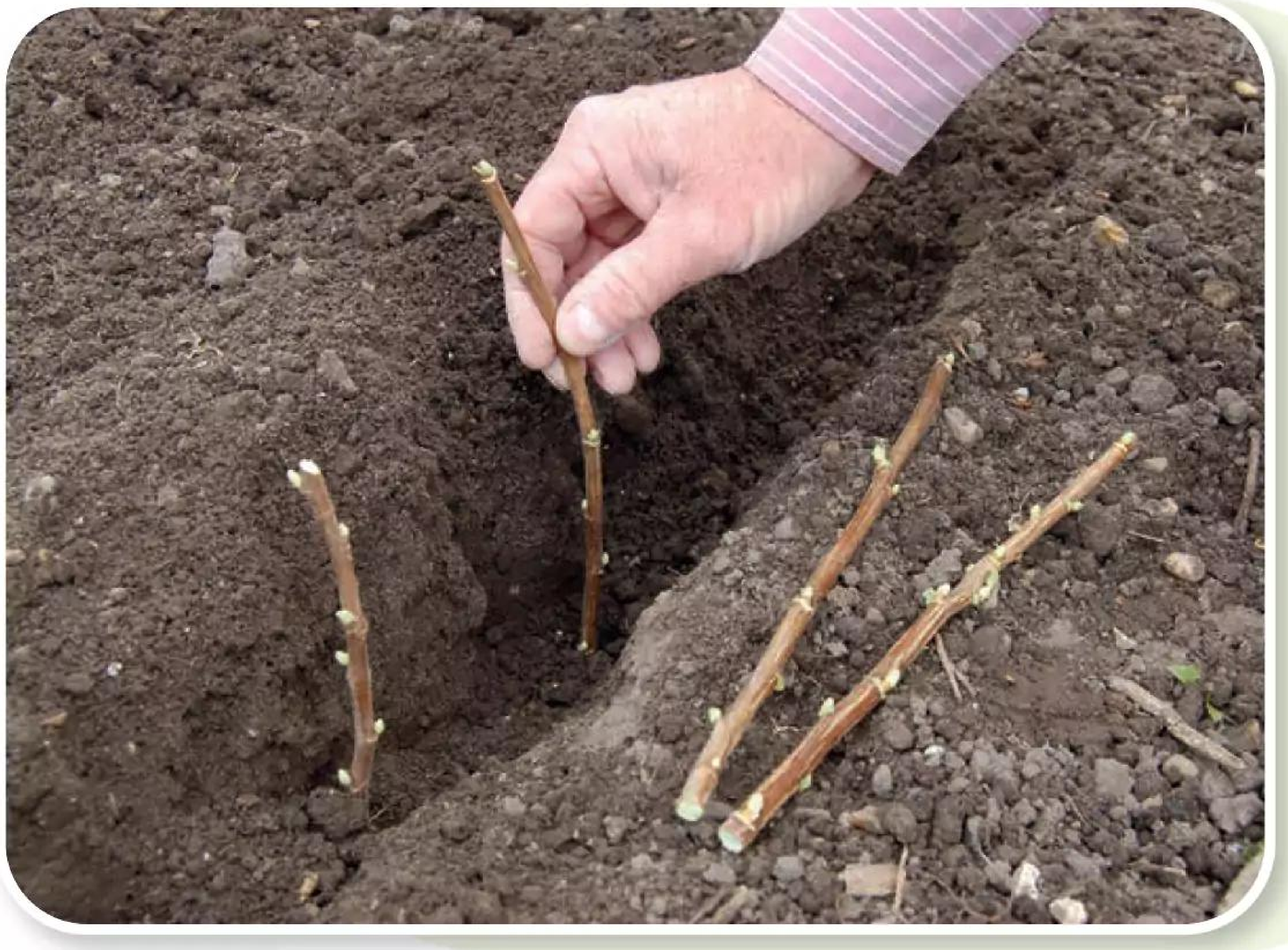
If you save and store your own runner bean seeds, check them occasionally and make sure they are still firm and dry. Any mildew developing on the seed coat is a sign of dampness and will spoil the seeds. A dry, frost-free place is ideal.

STEP BY STEP

TAKE CURRANT CUTTINGS

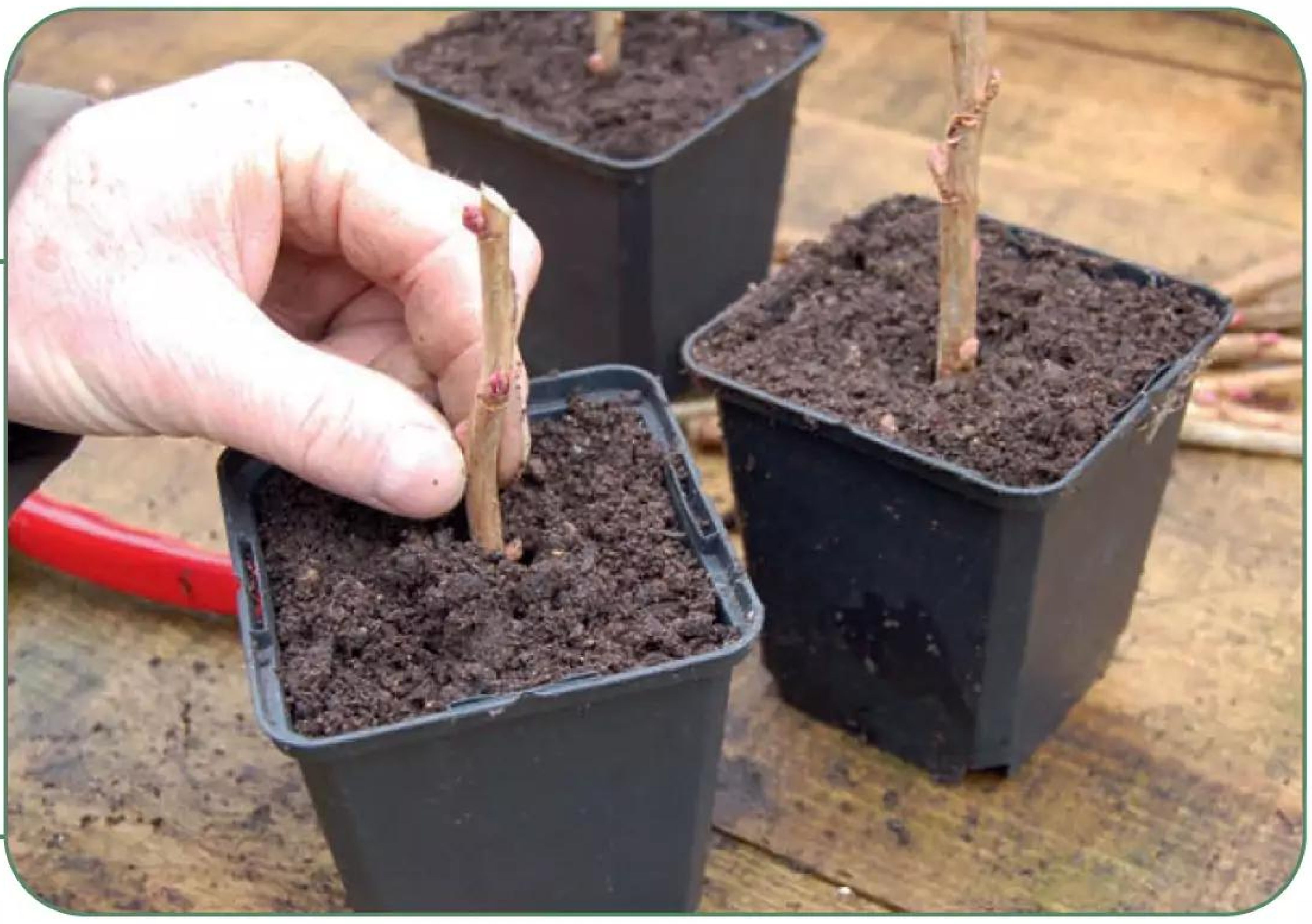
STEP 1: Now is the ideal time to take hardwood cuttings from currant bushes to get some new plants for free. Only propagate from healthy bushes and prepare the cuttings from this year's growth using stems that are pencil thickness or more. Make the cutting approx. 20cm (8in) long or roughly the length of a pair of secateurs, making a straight cut below the bottom bud and a sloping cut at the top.





STEP 2: All types of currant – red, black and white – root very easily and can be done directly into the garden. Fork over an area of soil and using a spade take out a 'V' trench around 15cm (6in) deep. Space the cuttings along the trench 15-20cm (6-8in) apart before backfilling with soil and firming. When finished the top couple of inches of the cutting should be above soil level.

STEP 3: Alternatively, cuttings can be pushed into pots of multipurpose compost and then stood in a cold frame. No heat is needed and over the winter roots will develop, followed by new shoots in spring. If rooting in small pots, you will need to pot into larger pots in summer. Rooted in pots or the garden, by next autumn you'll have plants ready to plant out into their final position.



PROTECT FIGS WITH FLEECE

Fig trees are hardy and will survive very cold winter conditions when they are dormant. However, the growth buds at the tips of the shoots and the tiny embryo fruits can be damaged by heavy frosts. If we can get the small fruits to overwinter they will give an early crop next year, so to protect them, cover them with a couple of layers of fleece in frosty weather.

START SOFT FRUIT PRUNING

If you didn't get around to pruning soft fruit bushes in the summer, you can give them a winter prune now.

With blackcurrants the aim is to prune out as much of the old wood that's already fruited, leaving behind the new growth to fruit next summer. It's a bit of a balancing act because as you cut out the old wood, inevitably you also remove some new growth. By removing up to one-third of the old stems low down in the bush you keep enough new wood for a crop next year and encourage new shoots for the following year.

SOW NOW

Broad beans, endive (winter types), exhibition onions.

PLANT NOW

Gooseberry, currant bushes, raspberries, cane fruit, all types of fruit tree.

HARVEST

Winter cabbage, cauliflower, kale, leeks, Brussels sprouts, celeriac, lettuce, celery, beetroot, chicory, carrots, swede, Jerusalem artichokes, spinach.

HARVEST WINTER VEG

In December there's a bountiful supply of fruit and vegetables to choose from. Some is freshly picked from the garden and others have been harvested and stored. The great thing about many winter vegetables such as cabbage, Brussels sprouts, kale, parsnips and leeks is once gathered from the garden they will stay fresh and in good condition if you keep them cool. This means that if the weather forecast is very wet or cold, you can plan ahead and harvest your veg in advance. This can then be supplemented with stored fruit and veg such as apples, onions and beetroot and maybe some crops that you are growing under cover in a greenhouse or polytunnel.

START SOIL PREPARATIONS

Where possible it's always a good idea to start soil preparations as soon as possible. As soon as you have cleared the beds make a start and December is the ideal month to try and get ahead. If you leave it until January or February, the soil can be very wet or frozen and should not be walked on. On beds where legumes (peas) and onions are going to be grown you could spread a few inches of home-made garden compost.

If you like digging your soil you can incorporate it as you dig but if you don't dig it's still a good idea to spread the compost and let the worms do the work for you.

CHECK APPLES BEING STORED

Apples picked in October tend to be good keepers and in the correct conditions many varieties will keep through until early spring. Ideally, they should be kept as cool as possible, but frost free, in a dry, dark place. You could store them unwrapped in trays so that the fruits are not touching. This way if one starts to rot it won't spread as easily to its neighbour.

DO IT NOW

- Now is a good time to carry out a soil test in the garden to determine if your soil is acid, neutral or alkaline. Kits only cost a few pounds and are easy to use.

- If rabbits are a problem in your garden protect newly planted fruit trees with a tree guard to prevent the bark being chewed.

- December is a good time to start winter pruning apple and pear trees by removing weak growth and crossing branches to open the canopy.

- Parsnips are hardy but when the soil is frozen they are difficult to lift. To prevent the soil freezing, cover part of the row with old compost or autumn leaves to act as a blanket.

- If pigeons are a problem in your garden, net the brassicas to protect them from damage through the winter.

IN THE GREENHOUSE

CLEAN GREENHOUSE GLASS

Although a greenhouse is perfect for overwintering many plants through the colder months, the poor light levels and short days are not particularly good for plant growth. To try and keep vegetable and fruits plants as healthy as possible we need to make sure that they get as much natural light as we can provide. Making sure the glass in your greenhouse is kept clean is really important at this time of the year and can make a big difference to plant growth. Giving the outside of the greenhouse a good wash down with soapy water to remove green algae on the glass and a build up a grime really does allow more light in to your plants.

WHAT TO DO IN DECEMBER

1 As autumn salad and vegetable crops come to an end, keep pulling them out to clear the ground.

2 Water plants growing in pots or the border carefully to maintain moist soil conditions, but don't over-water.

3 Pick over young vegetable plants and pick off any yellow or damaged leaves to help keep them growing and healthy.

4 If you have a heated propagator, sow onion seed at the end of the month in pots or seed trays to produce seedlings for growing on through spring.

5 Make sure any seedling weeds that germinated in autumn are removed before they are able to flower and seed.

HERBS FOR WINTER

Perennial herbs such as rosemary, thyme, sage and winter savoury that don't die down in autumn are all hardy and can be grown outside during the winter. However, pot grown plants can be brought under cover for the winter so that you can continue to pick leaves from them. They don't need heat, but the protection of a cold greenhouse or polytunnel will prevent them from getting too wet which is something many herbs don't like and it also helps to keep the worst of the frost off them. Kept under cover the plants will be in much better condition by the end of the winter, with the added bonus that you can carry on using them for fresh herbs.

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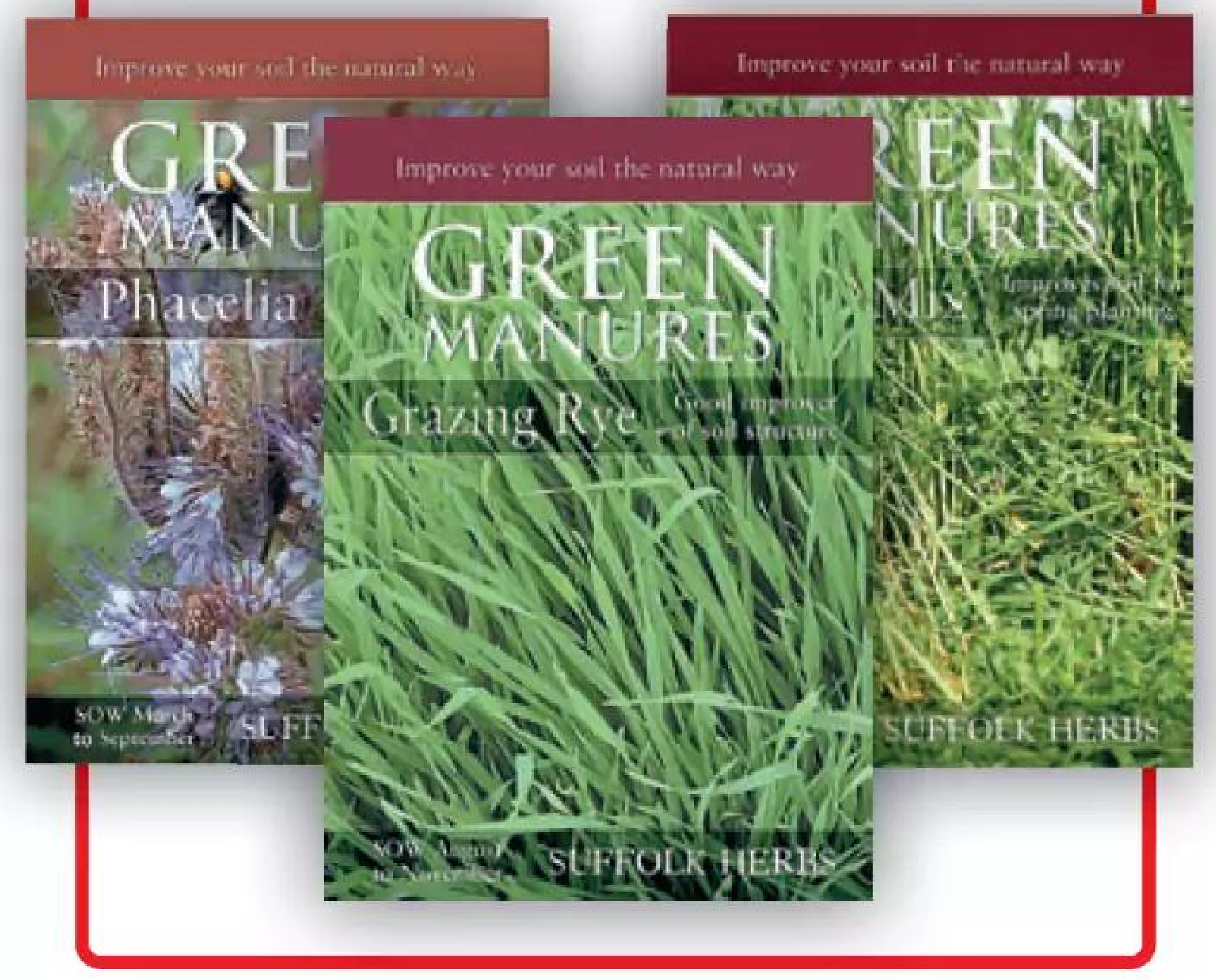
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GREEN MANURES
Phacelia
Grazing Rye
Good improver of soil structure
SUFFOLK HERBS

MULCH MATS

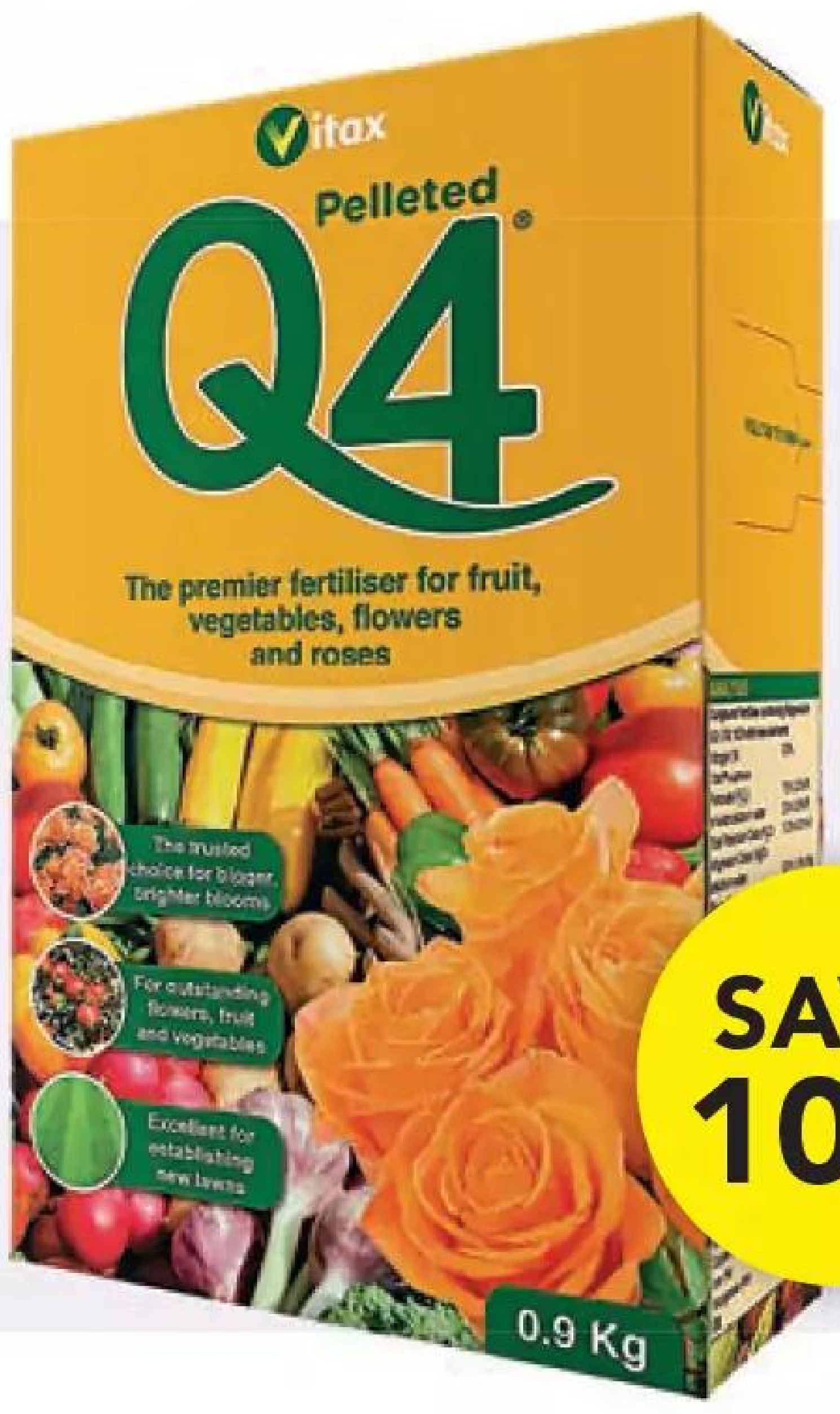
Mulch mats help to retain moisture and warmth in the soil and protect crops from soil and rain splashes. They keep lower leaves clean and dry – which in turn deters slugs – and are ideal for use with strawberry plants to keep the fruits off the soil. Another good thing about them is that they can be used year after year!

One pack of 10 mulch mats £6.50. Was £7.25
Two packs of 10 mulch mats £11.70. Was £13

Vitax
Biodegradable
Mulch Mats
Keeps fruit clean and helps prevent rotting. Ideal for strawberries lettuces and newly planted shrubs and roses.

SAVE 10%

ALSO IN THE KG SHOP THIS MONTH


Vitax
Pelleted
Q4
The premier fertiliser for fruit, vegetables, flowers and roses
0.9 Kg

SAVE 10%

Q4 PELLETED FERTILISER

Originally developed for the commercial grower, Q4 has proved to be an outstanding general-purpose fertiliser for use on a wide range of crops, including fruit, vegetables, flowers and roses.

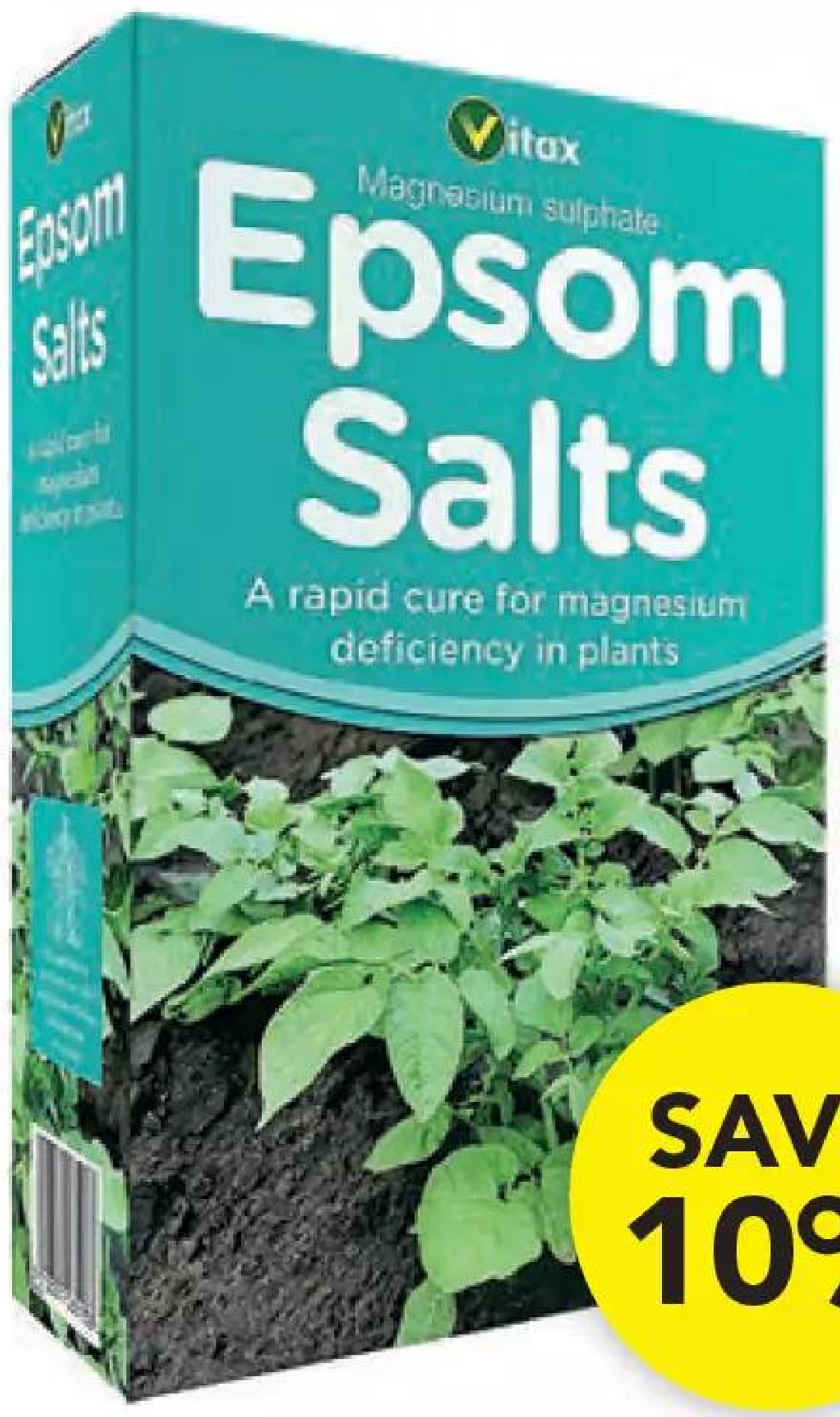
Apply throughout the growing season. Contains all the vital plant foods and trace elements essential for vigorous growth, abundant flowering and ripening of fruit.

900g bag £5.65. Was £6.30. Save 10%

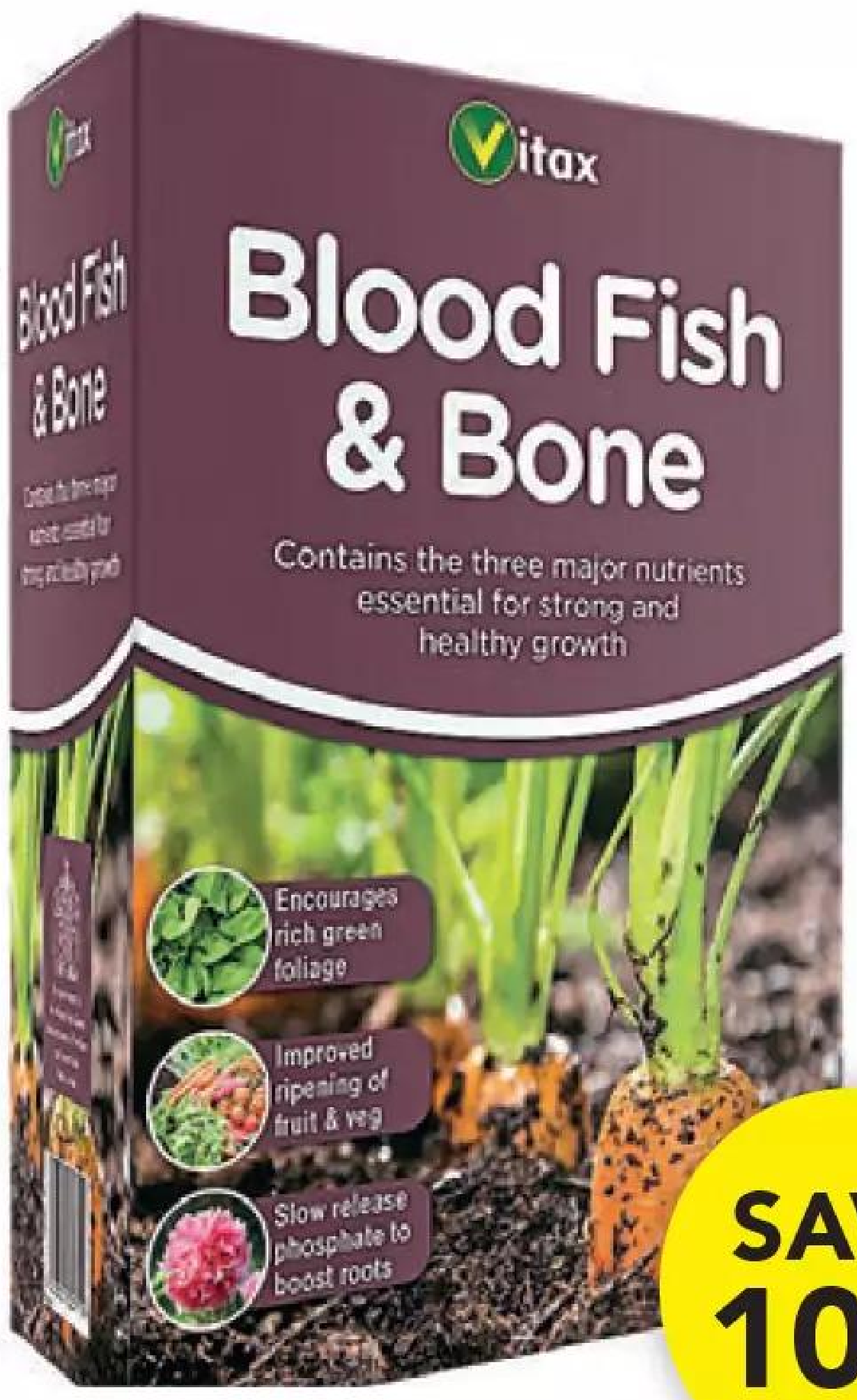
EPSOM SALTS FERTILISER

Epsom salts, also known as magnesium sulphate, can promote healthy plant growth and is particularly beneficial for tomatoes and house plants. Magnesium deficiency can cause leaves and foliage to turn brown and wither. Epsom salts is a rapid cure. Use as a base or liquid feed. Apply as necessary, full instructions are supplied.

1.25kg bag £6.75. Was £7.50. Save 10%


Vitax
Magnesium sulphate
Epsom Salts
A rapid cure for magnesium deficiency in plants

SAVE 10%


Vitax
Blood Fish & Bone
Contains the three major nutrients essential for strong and healthy growth
Encourages rich green foliage
Improved ripening of fruit & veg
Slow release phosphate to boost roots

SAVE 10%

BLOOD, FISH & BONE FERTILISER

Contains the three major nutrients essential for strong and healthy growth; nitrogen, potash and phosphate. Encourages rich green foliage, improves ripening of fruit and vegetables and gives a slow release phosphate to boost root development.

2.5kg bag £10.80. Was £12. Save 10%

CHICKEN MANURE PELLETS

Use this poultry manure to promote strong and healthy growth in all plants: soft fruit, vegetables, flowers, bed and border plants, shrubs and lawns. Poultry manure is the most effective organic material to promote strong, healthy growth in all plants in your garden or on the allotment. Also helps to improve clay and sandy soils.

A completely 100% organic fertiliser that has been fully composted, heat treated, dried and is weed-free. Comes in pellets.

Apply as a base dressing to plants to provide a balanced source of nutrients and trace elements to ensure strong, healthy growth.

Highly concentrated, virtually odourless and easy to apply and spread.

NPK: 4-3-2.5 +TE

15kg bag treats up to 200m².

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25kg pack £17.95
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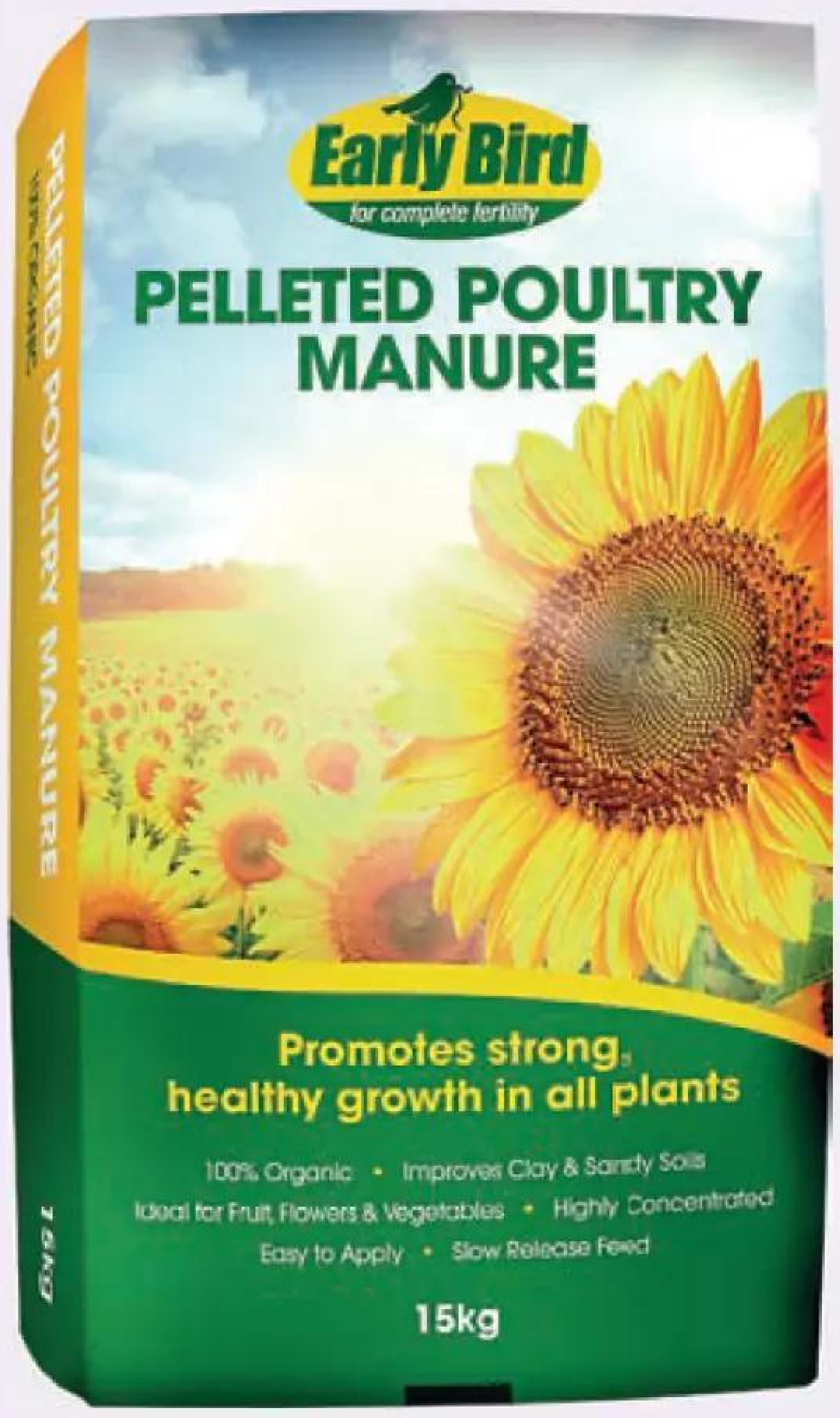
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for complete fertility
PELLETED POULTRY MANURE
Promotes strong, healthy growth in all plants
100% Organic • Improves Clay & Sandy Soils
Ideal for Fruit, Flowers & Vegetables • Highly Concentrated
Easy to Apply • Slow Release Feed
15kg

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Ideal for organic growers. The netting is woven or knitted from synthetic threads. This fine mesh fabric is designed to control insects that carry viruses. Also resistant to UV rays, mildew and rotting. Good chemical resistance. Controls the risk of cross-pollination by insects and reduces the need for pesticides.

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KG48155	Epsom salts fertiliser, 1.25kg	£6.75		
KG45915	Blood, fish & bone fertiliser, 2.5kg	£10.80		
KG46029	Chicken manure pellets, 25kg	£17.95		
KG46029MP	2 x chicken manure pellets, 25kg	£30		
KG45194	Cabbage & carrot fly netting, 2m x 10m	£32.40		
KG45194MP	2x cabbage & carrot fly netting, 2m x 10m	£58		
KGAUG25		POSTAGE: £1.95 for seeds and sundries		
		TOTAL £		

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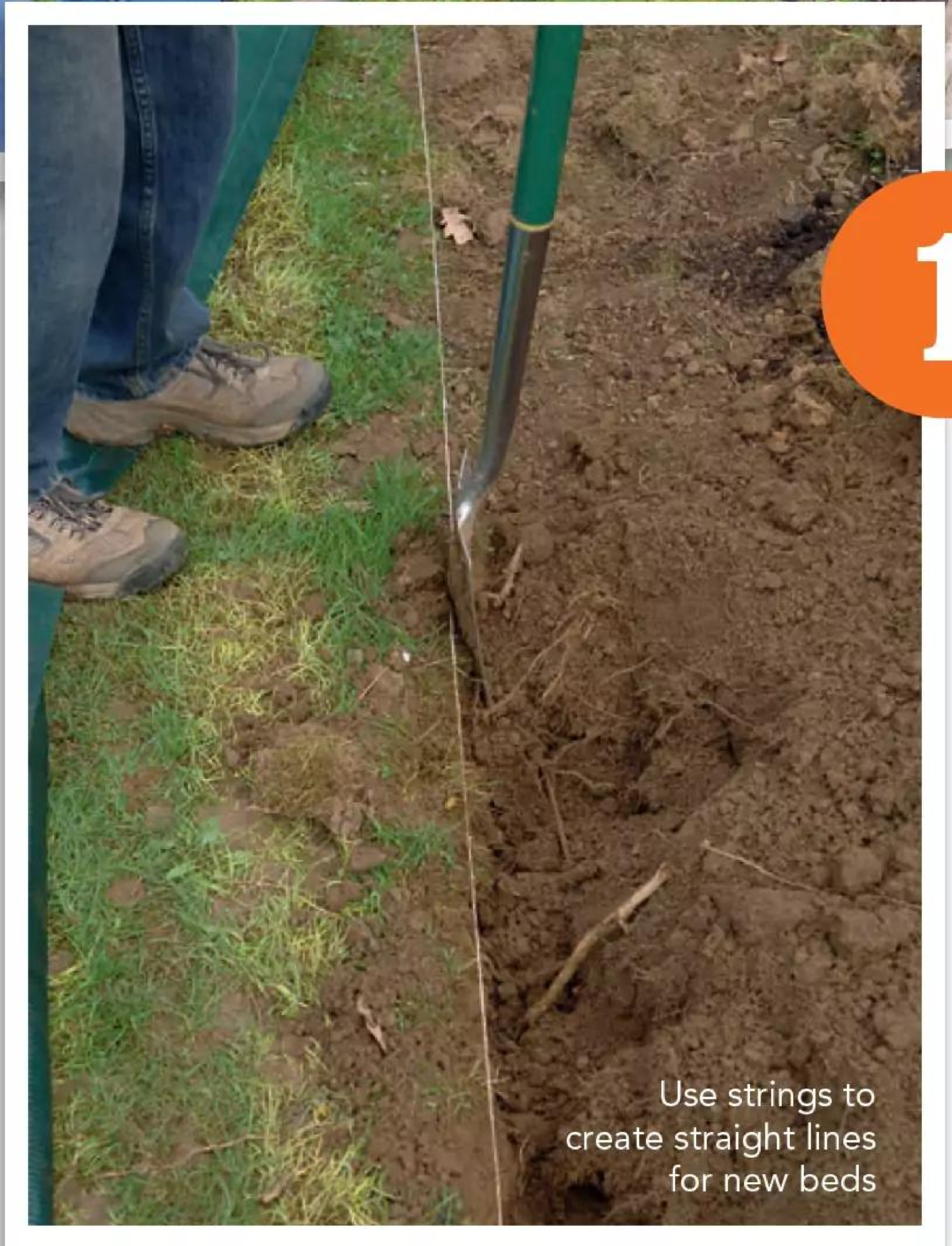
STARTING a new plot

So you want to start growing veg or expand an area you already have but have no idea where to start. Or you are about to take on an overgrown allotment? Emma Rawlings offers some tips

Creating a new raised bed veg garden on a lawn. Here turf is being removed by hand first

Starting to grow your own vegetables is a really exciting project but can seem a bit overwhelming at first. The best way is to start small and keep adding more areas and crops as you build up confidence. So the first question is what type of plot are you planning? Is it a veg plot from scratch in your back garden? Or do you want a few containers on a patio or maybe you are just about to take on an allotment? Here are a few pointers to help you get going.



Use strings to create straight lines for new beds

1 Plot from scratch

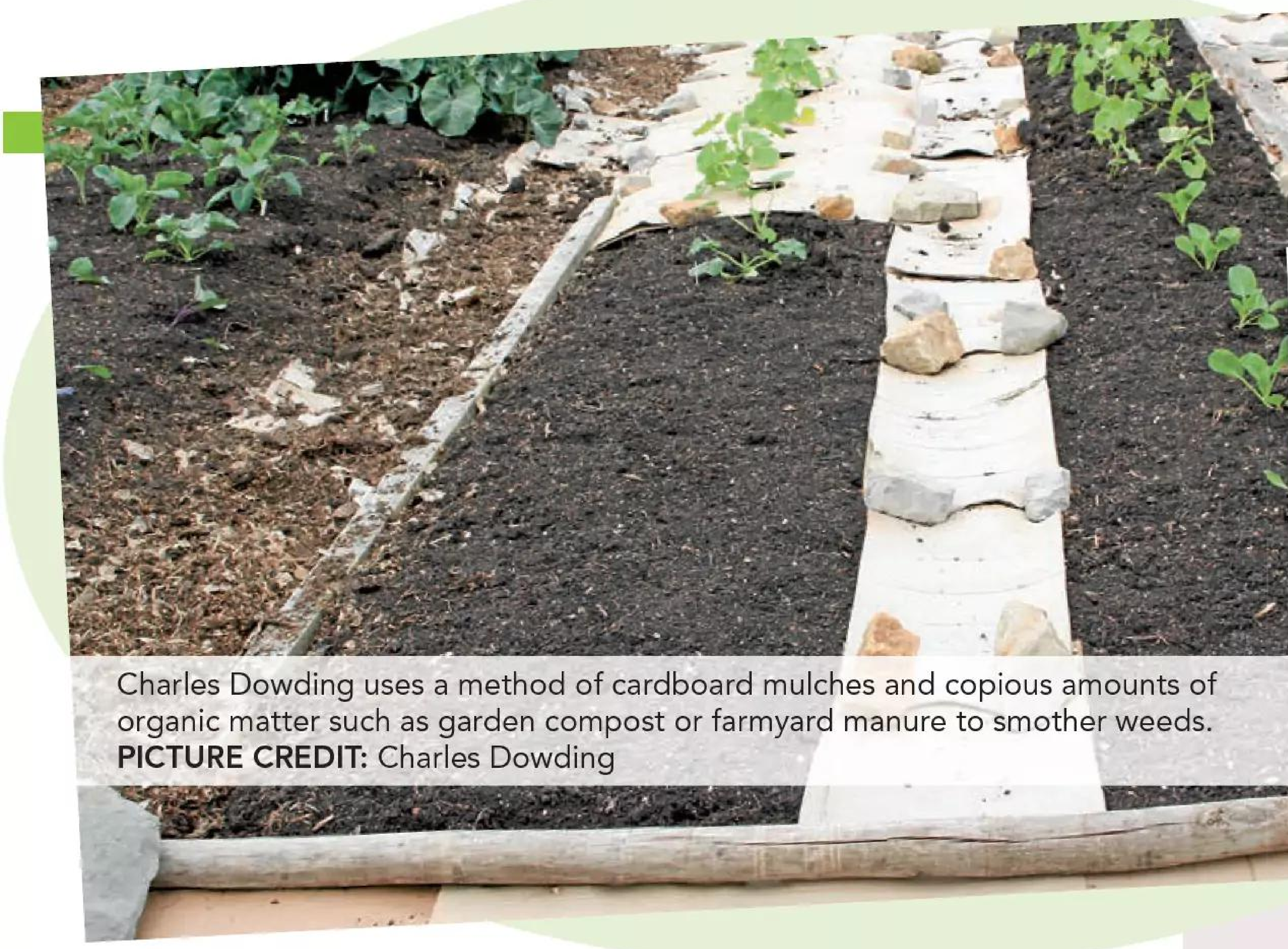
Ideally you want a sunny spot although part shade is fine for some leafy crops such as spinach and lettuce.

The soil quality is important and often the best place will be a piece of lawn or existing flower borders. If it is in part of a garden which is full of rubble and waste or is an old patio area then maybe raised beds might be a better option here unless you are prepared to put in a lot of extra preparation work first.

Turning lawn into a veg patch

If you are creating a veg patch from a piece of lawn you have a few options. If the area is not too big you can lift the turves of grass with a spade. The grass should lift up in nice slices. These can be used elsewhere in the garden if you want to grass an area or given away or you can make a turf stack. Literally pile up the turf with grass facing grass. Eventually it will break down and give you some nice top soil to put back on your borders. If you have a large area you can hire mechanical turf lifters if you need help with this.

You will usually find quite good soil beneath a lawn although it can



Charles Dowding uses a method of cardboard mulches and copious amounts of organic matter such as garden compost or farmyard manure to smother weeds.
PICTURE CREDIT: Charles Dowding

be compacted from years of foot traffic. So the next step is to fork over the soil beneath to break up this hard pan. Once the soil is dug over you may be ready to plant if the soil is good. If the soil is really heavy and sticks to your fork badly it could be very clayey. If the soil is the opposite it could be quite sandy. A nice loamy soil will be fairly easy to dig and break up nicely into a crumbly material and be quite dark. There should be plenty of worms too.

Spray and dig

This is obviously not going to work for you if you don't like using pesticides. Mark out the lawn area you want as the veg bed and then spray off that area of grass with a weedkiller before digging the grass in. It can work well but if the weedkiller does not do a good job then you may find some grass regrowing.

No dig method

Charles Dowding is a 'no dig' specialist and has accumulated a wealth of knowledge he now passes on to others in courses and books. The no dig method is about leaving the soil undisturbed and feeding the soil with organic matter to encourage a natural environment teeming with soil life. A soil that is full of the right soil flora and fauna in balance will produce the best crops. We recommend you visit Charles' website for more details on the subject at www.charlesdowding.co.uk.

Charles also starts plots using the no dig method. A permeable (biodegradable material) such as cardboard is laid over the ground. The ground can even be weedy (preferably not a really persistent perennial weed) or a lawn. Then a generous amount of compost or rotted farmyard manure is piled on top (roughly 5cm/2in). This you will have to source and make sure the manure is not from animals that have been on pasture treated with weedkillers.

The beds are not dug but are created in such a way that you can reach to the middle from both sides. You don't need sides for these beds although initially some temporary wooden logs or posts laid on their sides can help to keep things tidy while the beds are being formed. You could use cardboard or other materials such as woodchip between the beds to create pathways. Initially planting into these beds it is best to use vegetable plants or maybe potato tubers if at the right time of year. Each year more organic matter either from your own compost heaps or imported is put on the beds.

This is a great method for many reasons. It means you avoid the hard annual digging over of the plot. The no dig method is also well known to be an excellent way to keep the soil in good health. Digging can actually damage the delicate balance. The only downside is requiring plenty of organic matter to top up the beds every year.

You can create your own organic matter if you make your vegetable plot first then the next job is to make a compost heap to feed your plot. Making your own compost is as important as the plot itself as it returns the goodness to the soil that you removed in growing the crops.

You can grow a wide variety of fruit and veg in pots

2

Containers and raised beds

If digging up an area of your garden is not possible you can grow lots of veg in containers or create some raised beds. Any container that holds compost or soil can be used as long as it has drainage holes in the bottom. Buckets with holes drilled in the bottom are good to start with as you don't need anything fancy. If you are planning on using a lot of large containers or building raised beds it may be a good idea to buy in some top soil (Rolawn do a Vegetable & Fruit Topsoil) which you buy in bulk. Soil will retain moisture and nutrients better than compost and if using in pots these are more stable filled with soil. Plus you are not using peat based composts and if a long term project soil would be better than peat-free compost.

Taking on an allotment is fun but some need more work than others when you start

Covering the soil with a membrane will help smother weeds

3 Getting an Allotment

Taking on an allotment is a big commitment and in some parts of the country there is a long waiting list, but once you get your plot the fun can begin. If you take on a badly overgrown plot it can be a bit daunting so best not to try and clear it all in one go. You could create a drawing of the plot and or peg/string out certain areas. If the ground does not seem too bad areas can be covered in Mypex or cardboard weighted down and just left until you are ready to work them. Carpet is often used but not always recommended as it can contain toxins and it sometimes shreds if left down for a long time and eventually soil covers it.

You could also lay thick black polythene (a heavy duty one) if you have patches of particularly troublesome weeds such as mare's tail, bindweed or ground elder or similar. It may be that you need to leave it on for several months. Once you remove the polythene you will have killed some of it but incredibly some may survive and regrow but in theory it will have been weakened.

A plot that is covered in brambles, thistles, tree seedlings, rough tufty grass and perennial weeds is a real challenge. It is best to cut it back as hard to the ground as you can with a brushcutter or strimmer depending on the woody nature of it. Do check and disturb the area first to frighten away any wildlife such as hedgehogs. Also be careful on allotments as glass, metal and other debris can be hidden beneath the undergrowth. Once you have got the worst of the growth and debris off an area then you can dig over small sections removing as many weeds and roots as you can.

If you are not averse to spraying and you are doing this job in the spring/summer you could wait for the inevitable regrowth and then spray it off.

To rotavate or not to rotavate, that is the question. A tricky one because in theory the blades chop up any perennial roots and these often resprout en masse but you need to weigh it up. With a beast of a rotavator you can create a deep, fine tilth quickly. If you plant or sow into this you will get weeds coming through but the root pieces may be smaller so are actually easier to extract and with regular weeding in the first couple of years you can get on top of the worst of it.

There is no easy quick fix with an overgrown allotment but doing small sections at a time and persistence and regular weeding will pay off.

Raised beds can be any height or length but the width should not be too wide so you can reach the middle from both sides

RAISED BEDS OR NOT?

Whether you decide to have a veg plot of raised beds or garden at ground level this is a matter of personal preference. Raised beds are more costly to set up unless you have a source of recycled materials. They do make things neater and are easier to manage especially if the sides are reasonably high. These are particularly good for people with mobility issues. However, the higher the sides, the more material you will need to fill the beds. Soil is best so this may need to be bought in.

A raised bed can also be as low as a few inches to just create 'an edge' although these can be more of a trip hazard! The paths can be grass or you could lay a membrane when you are creating the beds and this can be topped with gravel or bark chippings. This will help prevent weed growth but a membrane is not vital if you are happy to weed the pathways.

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